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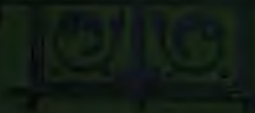
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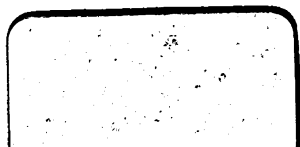
SISTER

CORA





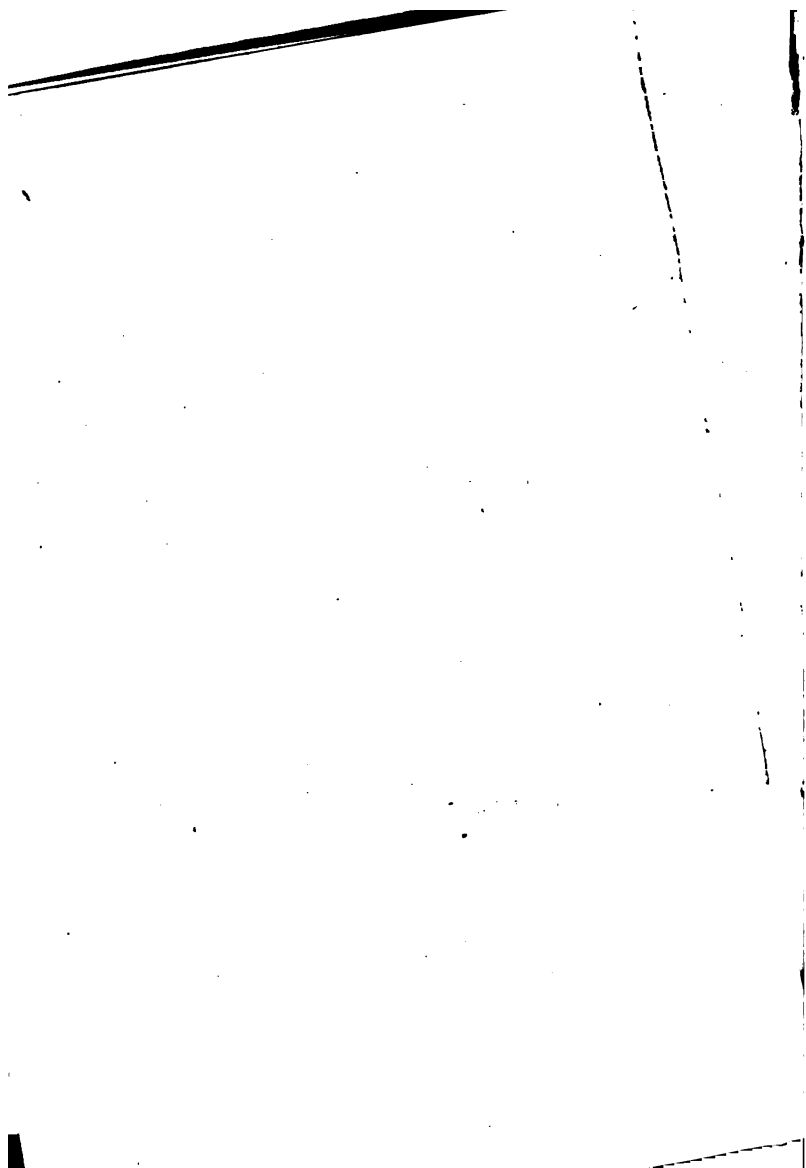
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SISTER CORA.

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SISTER CORA.

A Tale of the Eighteenth Century.

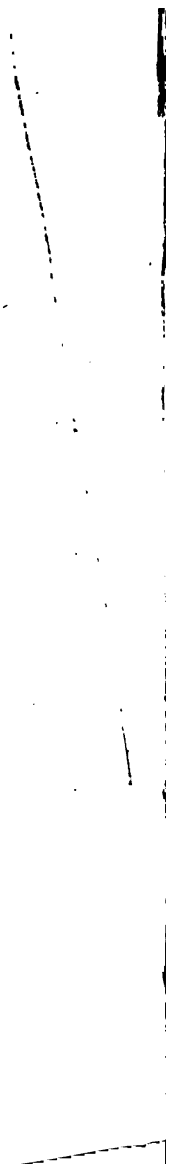
BY THE AUTHOR OF

'CARRY MORGAN,' 'SAM SILVA,' 'BIDDY THE MAID OF ALL WORK,' ETC.

'Man in society is like a flower
Blown in its native bed ; 'tis there alone
His faculties, expanded in full bloom,
Shine out—there alone reach their proper use.'

EDINBURGH:
WILLIAM OLIPHANT AND CO.
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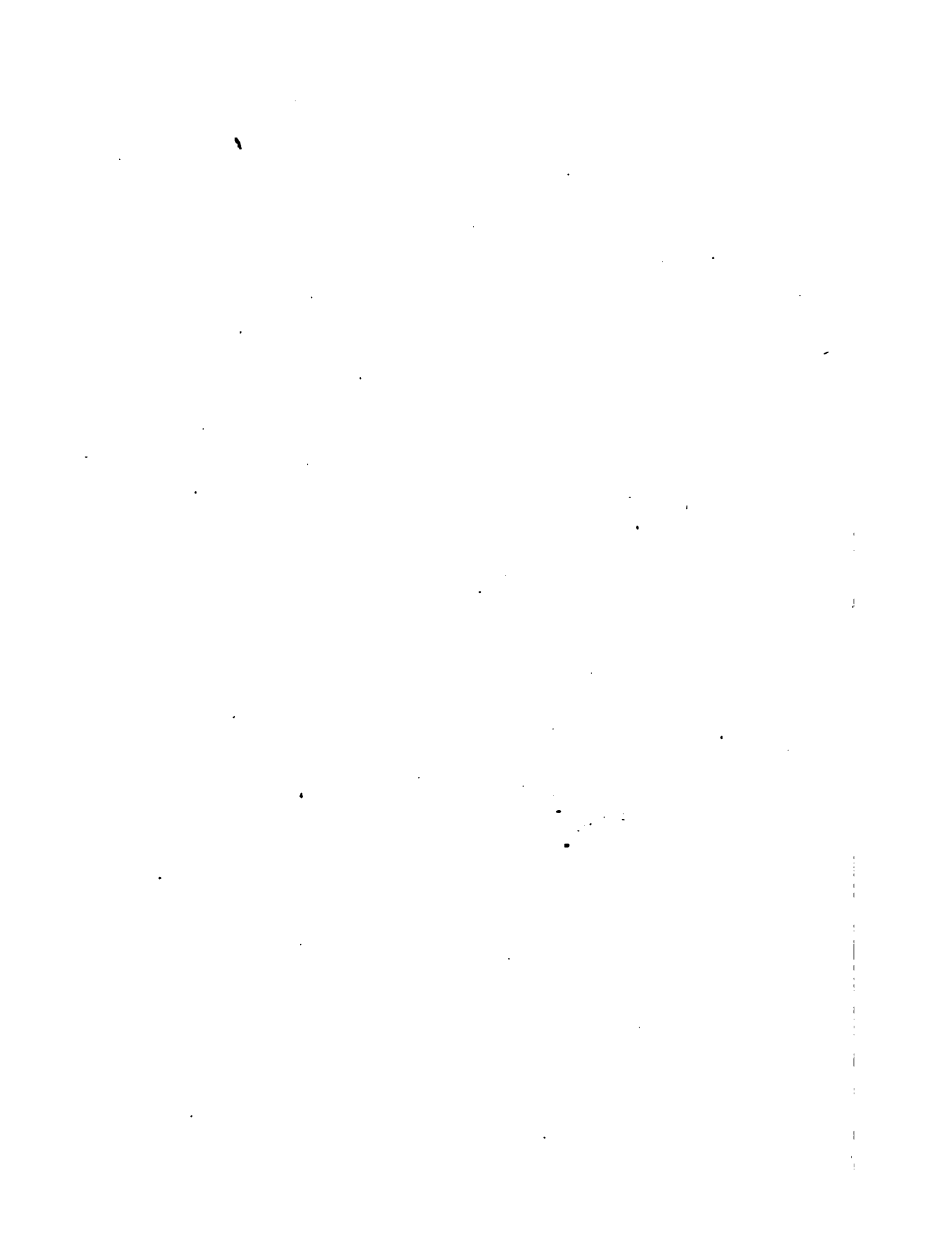
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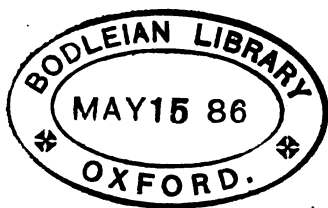
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CONTENTS.



INTRODUCTION.

'L'ETOILE DE MA VIE,'	7
---------------------------------	---

CHAPTER I.

THE THREE NUNS,	12
---------------------------	----

CHAPTER II.

MARGUERITE'S STORY,	34
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

THE PRIEST AND PREACHER,	54
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

THE MERCHANT,	67
-------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

THE PRIEST AND THE PROTESTANT,	80
--	----





SISTER CORA.



INTRODUCTION.

‘L’ETOILE DE MA VIE.’

MY grandfather was a fine old gentleman of the old school. He wore powder in his hair, knee-breeches, black silk stockings, and silver buckles in his shoes, broad lace ruffles half covering his long white hands, and a frill of the same costly material peeping out from between the edges of his black satin waistcoat. His manner was polite and punctilious to a fault,—if politeness could be a fault in one who was at the same time so upright and sincere, so kind and amiable, so generous and tender-hearted, that everybody both respected and loved him. His grandchildren were no exception to the general rule.

To them he was an object of reverential affection, from the time when, released from their nurse's arms, he danced them on the point of his toe, till he initiated them into the mysteries of the French language, of which he was completely master, and which he liked to teach them,—a love which they retain for his memory; a love increased rather than lessened by the fact that the place which once knew him now knows him no more.

His exquisite French pronunciation was due to his grandmother, who was a Frenchwoman, and whose memory he cherished with an almost idolatrous affection; for his mother had died when he was very young, and his grandmother had supplied her place, and been a mother indeed to him, loving him with a double love not only for his own sake, but for the sake of her whom she had lost. His grandfather too was French, but being much older than his wife, he had died when she was still a woman in her prime, and when his grandson was a mere boy; old enough, however, to remember his neat, slight figure, his bright eyes, sparkling with all the fire of his youth, his beautiful silvery curls, and the lessons of piety, honour, and scrupulous morality which had sunk so deep into the boy's mind, and had no doubt helped to form his character. But though he remembered his grandfather,

the recollection was but faint compared to that which he cherished of his grandmother. '*L'etoile de ma vie*,' he was wont to call her to us children, who had some difficulty in calculating the exact degree of relationship in which she stood to us; and though he had loved his wife, our grandmother, with tender, chivalrous affection, and mourned her loss to the end of his days, I believe that in his old age the memory of his second mother was uppermost in his thoughts.

At any rate, it was of her he talked most to his grandchildren, and they were never wearied listening to his reminiscences of her. According to him, she was not only the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but the best he had ever known; the former opinion being unanimously confirmed by one and all, when, at rare times and as an extra reward for good behaviour or attention during our French lesson, we were shown a miniature portrait of her, exquisitely painted on ivory; whilst the latter we were equally ready to endorse, because dear grandpapa was so very good himself.

Born during the reign of Louis XIV., she had been a contemporary of the gifted, pious Pascal, the amiable, saintly Fenelon, the eloquent Bossuet, and the no less eloquent Bourdaloue, who was the favourite preacher of Louis XIV.,

the French Tillotson, the orator admired alike by Catholics and Protestants,—who, though a Jesuit, was a frank and upright man; though a priest, a pattern of morality; though the popular favourite of a dissolute Court, a faithful expounder of the Scriptures; even that same Louis Bourdaloue who, in the zenith of his fame, retired into private life, that he might devote his every gift and faculty to the relief and succour of suffering humanity. She had been in her youth a Roman Catholic; and that she had been a nun, who, weary of her convent life, had hazarded all and made her escape, raised her in our eyes to the position of a kind of holy heroine. Had we been Catholics, we would, no doubt, have made a saint of her—our Catholic ancestry and consequent associations helping, perhaps, the feelings with which we regarded her memory, and giving her the sacred niche which she still holds in our thoughts.

‘Grandpapa, you should write your grandmother’s story and put it in a book,’ I remarked one day, after he had showed me (her namesake and his prime favourite) the lovely portrait of her he called, ‘*L’etoile de ma vie.*’

‘I’ll leave that to you, Cora darling,’ he replied, fondly smoothing my rebellious curls.

He was only jesting, I believe, but, child-like,

I took all he said for earnest, and the idea never left me; it grew with my growth, and strengthened with my strength, till it found expression in the following pages, under the title of SISTER CORA.





CHAPTER I.

THE THREE NUNS.

‘ Open the cages,
Let the birds flee ;
Down with the convents,
Set the nuns free.’

SISTER CORA was a nun, who had renounced, or had professed to renounce, the world, with all its pomps, vanities, and pleasures. Poor Cora ! she had resolved to take the veil in a mad fit of religious enthusiasm, and now the impulse which prompted her to immure herself for life in a convent, and which supported her during the necessary probationary trials, had passed away, and her heart was beating and throbbing and panting for the liberty she had despised, even like that of the poor imprisoned bird, which throws itself in mad despair against the wires of its cage. Only twelve months before, she had been so proud to become the

'bride of heaven,' and now her bosom was the seat of anything but heavenly emotions; for she hated everybody within the convent walls, from the fat, important abbess, down to the grim old portress, who looked as though she had been buried for a century and been resuscitated for want of a more fitting Cerberus.

But no! Cora did not hate everybody, for there was gentle, pious Sister Marguerite, whom she might pity, but certainly could not hate; indeed, she almost loved her,—at least, she might have loved her, had she not been so thoroughly miserable herself and full of self-pity, to the exclusion of other feelings. And there was Sister Louise, too, wicked Sister Louise, who made game behind backs of everything and everybody, and who forced Cora to laugh sometimes, sad and sick at heart as she really was. But poor Cora might be sick and sad till her very heart broke within her; she had become a nun of her own free-will, and a nun, she knew, she must remain for life; and she shuddered as she thought of that life spent as she was now spending it.

But she knew that there was no hope, no chance of escape, no glimmer of light, however faint, in the distant future, to sustain and cheer her in the present days of darkness. No; there was nothing

for Cora but a dreary, numb despair, mingled with vain regrets for what she had thrown away, and for what she might have been. Where now were the heavenly aspirations she had considered as so many proofs of her vocation for a holy life? where the direct communion with heaven which she had expected to enjoy, secluded from the world and free from its temptations and anxieties? Gone, all gone! and nothing left behind but the dust and ashes of an extinguished enthusiasm.

‘Why did you come here?’ Louise had asked in a whisper, as one morning they knelt side by side, and she saw the tears dropping from Cora’s eyes on the stone pavement of the chapel; and, ‘Why, oh, why did I come here?’ was now the constant wail of Cora’s famished heart. But, alas! she was *in*, and *out* she could not get.

There was no help, no hope for Cora, nothing but the same weary round of monotonous duties; saying prayers, whilst she did not pray; counting beads, whilst in her heart she despised it as childish mummery; performing acts of menial drudgery which she disliked and loathed; confessing to the priest, whilst her whole soul rose in rebellion at being compelled to do so; and, in fact, looking on herself as a lost, sacrificed one,—the knowledge, too, that no one was to blame but herself for the choice

she had made for life, making it all the more difficult to bear. Yes, nobody but herself; for had not her friends one and all anxiously opposed her wishes, and entreated her to renounce her intentions ere it was too late? Her mother, her dear widowed mother, good pious Catholic though she was, had wept and implored in vain, and had only ceased to remonstrate after a long private interview with the family confessor; but though after that conference she had kept silence on the subject, Cora could not forget that her wistful, pleading eyes had said more than words; and a great choking sob would almost suffocate her, as she remembered how, from the heights of her spiritual pride, she had looked down upon the yearnings of that mother's heart. And her sister, the tender, clinging, affectionate Theresa, how was it possible, Cora thought now, that she could resist *her* entreaties, and the tears with which she had almost blinded herself? Alas! she had been carried away by pride; and bitterly she regretted her obstinacy, and found her punishment more than she could bear. She had discovered her mistake only too soon; for, from the moment that the last link which bound her to the world without was severed, the enthusiasm which had till then sustained and blinded her had gradually

died away. She awoke from her dream to find herself a prisoner for life; and this became the ruling idea of her mind, the never-lost-sight-of fact, which poisoned every thought and embittered every feeling.

Of course Cora confessed all this to the priest, old Father Chatillon; and the old man, who had listened to many similar revelations from home-sick girls, who had either gradually become reconciled to their fate or found early graves in the convent graveyard, gave her absolution and inflicted mild and varied penances, sighing as he did so, and muttering to himself, 'Poor child! time will either kill or cure her.'

'What! penance again,' said Sister Louise to Cora one morning; 'why *do* you confess so much?'

'Confess!' said Cora; 'do you not confess everything?'

Louise made no reply, but gave her shoulders an expressive shrug.

'Not confess!' thought Cora; 'what a relief that would be!'

'You ask if I don't confess everything,' said Louise, coming very close, and speaking in a whisper; 'what a start the father would get if he saw right down into *my* heart;' and she laughed

a bitter, scornful laugh, though there was a note of sadness in it, which touched a sympathetic chord in Cora's heart.

'Why did *you* come here?' she asked in turn.

She was still more surprised and startled by the effect of her question on Sister Louise, whose face flushed scarlet, and then became deadly pale, as she turned away without replying. But she came back, and laying her hands on Cora's shoulders, she looked into her eyes with a wild, mournful stare, which fascinated and frightened her.

'I came here,' she whispered, 'because I quarrelled with my lover; and we parted to meet no more. Ah me, ah me! I thought to punish him by taking the veil, and I found out, when too late, that I had only punished myself.'

The anguish depicted on Louise's face, and the wailing tone of her voice, touched a chord in Cora's heart, and roused feelings which had of late been petrified within her. Throwing her arms round her neck, she murmured kind words of sympathy and pity, and was surprised by the ready response with which they were received.

Hugging her to her bosom, Louise whispered, 'I pitied you before, but I love you now, dear, dear Cora;' but the next moment she turned hastily away, as though ashamed of the unwonted

emotion which she had displayed ; and that very evening Cora was puzzled to see her doing her best to make the Sisters laugh, as she walked behind the Mother Superior, mimicking the waddling of her corpulent person, as she headed the procession of nuns proceeding to the chapel where they assembled for evening prayers. Cora did not know that Louise's mirth was the fruit of reckless despair, and that no sadder heart than hers beat within the walls of the convent.

And there were many sad hearts there,—some who had come because they were sad and hopeless, weary of life and done with the world, to find in the monotonous quiet of convent life that life was still sweet, and that the world still possessed many attractions for them ; whilst others, like Cora and Louise, had either been actuated by a religious enthusiasm, which was now gone, or by a spirit of revengeful pique, which had brought its own punishment. Cora discovered all this through time, and the knowledge of the fact that she had so many companions in misery, instead of proving the consolation to her which in other circumstances it might have been, only made her own case appear all the more hopeless. Had any of the nuns been happy and contented, there might have been some hope that she too

might become reconciled to her lot ; but their submission was of the necessity which knows no law, and had more the appearance of despair than of cheerful resignation. The only doubtful exception was Sister Marguerite, who really seemed, if not cheerful and happy, to be at least resigned to her lot, and who, less occupied with self-pity than the others, was more unselfish, kinder, and sympathizing. If a nun was ill, Marguerite always begged the office of nurse, and was unwearied in the discharge of her duties, even incurring punishment for breaking the rules of the convent on behalf of the sick or dying.

A grave, sad, sweet woman was Sister Marguerite, looking, Cora sometimes thought, liker heaven than earth, and often she wished to gain her confidence and ascertain the secret of her comparative tranquillity ; but, gentle and humble as Marguerite invariably was, there was a nameless dignity about her which prevented any approach to familiarity, and made it impossible for Cora to put the question to her which she had put to Louise, and ask her how she had come there. Chance favoured her, however ; and one day, almost before she was aware, the words which had often hovered on her lips were uttered, and she had asked Sister Marguerite how *she* had come there.

Sunday C VII.

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without was severed
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They were standing together before one of the graves in the convent graveyard, having been occupied during the morning in weeding the flower borders which surrounded and ornamented the graves of the buried sisters,—a task performed by the nuns in turn, but which none of them liked except Marguerite, who seemed to enjoy the occupation almost as much as her favourite one of nursing. The grave at their feet was that of a nun who had died several years before Cora took the veil, who had been nursed by Sister Marguerite, and who, it was whispered amongst the Sisters, had died of a broken heart.

Marguerite always lingered lovingly by this grave, and this morning had fallen into a reverie, standing at the head with one hand resting on the wooden cross, round which she had twined the clinging tendrils of a vine. Her hood had fallen back, and the pure white muslin surrounding her face contrasted well with the crimson flush which stooping over the flowers in the sunshine had roused in her usually pallid cheeks. Cora was surprised by the placid beauty it imparted to the features, a beauty she had never observed before. Gazing on her spell-bound, she saw the large, sad eyes slowly fill with tears, then brim over, and the drops roll unheeded down her

cheeks, falling on her coarse black robe and on the grass at her feet like summer rain. There were no sobs, no convulsive heavings of the bosom ; nothing but tears, large tears, welling out from the bottom of a heart in which passion either of joy or sorrow had long been dead. Then her lips began to move, and Cora held her breath to listen and catch the words. 'Buried alive!' she murmured, and Cora's blood ran cold, as for a moment she put a literal construction on the expression ; but Marguerite continued, 'Yes, these were her last words—words, alas ! only too true. You *were* buried alive, Marie ! Within these prison walls your once gay young heart was crushed and broken, and the strings, stretched and tightened with suppressed feeling and smothered emotion, snapped ere they had time to harden and wither like mine ! But she is no longer buried,' she continued after a pause ; 'it is only the casket lies below ; the jewel shines above in the New Jerusalem, where her free spirit rejoices in the boundless liberty for which she pined and panted on earth.' As Marguerite spoke, she raised her eyes to heaven, and becoming suddenly conscious that she had been thinking aloud, and that she had a listener, she hurriedly pulled her hood over her face, and turned away with a scared

glance at Cora, in which shame and fear visibly mingled.

It was then that Cora eagerly whispered, 'How did you come here?'

Marguerite started as she spoke, and looked round at her with a strange, far-off look in her wet eyes, like one suddenly brought face to face with some painful, long past experience, buried but not dead, smothered but not forgotten; and as Cora heard the deep, long-drawn sigh which followed her question, and saw Marguerite press her hand on her heart as though in pain, she wished the words unspoken, and would willingly have withdrawn them. But painful as it evidently was to recall the past, it was sweet to the poor nun even to be asked a question,—a question which showed sympathy with her as a sentient being, separated as she was supposed to be by a pious fraud from the thoughts and feelings of the world she had renounced; and, conscientious as Sister Marguerite was, she yielded to the temptation, and with a stealthy glance in the direction of the convent windows—a glance begotten of years of patient endurance and obedience, which had gradually affected a nature once frank and open as the day—she stooped over the already well-trimmed border and whispered, 'I will tell

you how I came here ; but go to the other side and see if there are any weeds there.'

Cora understood, and silently obeyed ; and, both stooping at each side of the narrow grave, their heads approached as if by accident, and Marguerite could unbosom herself without rousing the suspicions of any spy who might be watching them.

If Cora expected a curious, romantic narrative, she was disappointed ; nevertheless, the few words in which Marguerite told her tale were never forgotten by her, but were ever after indelibly engraven on her memory, and inseparably associated with the scene in which they were uttered. Associated with that lovely summer morning, the very beauty of which sickened her with its dazzling sunbeams and its balmy breezes, which, coming from without, seemed (buried alive as she felt herself to be) to wither her cheek with the breath of scenes of beauty and happiness with which she had now no concern ; and shivering under the soft, sweet influences of Nature and Nature's beauties, she could have exchanged them for gloomy clouds and a sunless sky. Associated with the convent graveyard ; the singing of birds in the adjoining garden ; the lazy hum of a bee which had settled on the leaves of the vine ; and

the letters R.I.P. carved on the foot of the cross at the end of the inscription, which simply stated the name, age, and date of the death of the broken-hearted nun.

‘I came here,’ said Marguerite, ‘because I thought heaven worth any sacrifice, and that to gain it I must leave the world and deny myself all its pleasures and enjoyments, forgetting that I could not leave myself behind ; that I brought with me a warm, human heart, which would not be denied its rights, the cravings of which for love and sympathy it was impossible to stifle.’ Marguerite paused for a moment, and pressed her hand upon her heart ere she continued :

‘I was an enthusiastic, visionary girl, and I imagined that in denying the cravings of my intellect as well as of my heart, I was doing God service, and earning a heavenly reward. Left to myself, however, I am sure I would not have decided as I did ; but the enthusiasm of a highly-gifted, much-loved friend, to whom I had been betrothed from my infancy, infected me with a passion for self-sacrifice, and when he became a priest, I became a nun.’ Again Marguerite paused, and busied herself with pretended weeds. ‘If we erred, as I now believe we did,’ she continued, with quivering lips, ‘it was from the

purest of motives, but'— here the solemn tolling of the great bell of the convent made both of the nuns start to their feet, and follow each other along the narrow path with slow, measured steps and bent heads, as though occupied with solemn thoughts suitable to the approaching hour of prayer, Marguerite murmuring to herself, 'Alas, alas! deceit, deceit! born of our position; time was when I would have scorned such meanness.' And there was no humbler penitent than she in the chapel that day, for during the chanting of the Latin prayers, she was saying within herself, like the publican in the temple, 'God be merciful to me a sinner;' whilst Cora, who now never prayed at all, was sighing, 'Poor, poor Marguerite!'

The following day Cora and Louise were picking fruit in the orchard, both sad and silent. Louise looked crushed and broken-spirited, and disinclined even for a whisper, though she seldom missed such an opportunity; and Cora observed that, as she listlessly pursued her task, the tears were constantly overflowing,—not a free, refreshing shower, but drops slowly distilled, and furtively wiped away.

Coming close by chance, Cora gently touched her hand, though she did not venture to look at her, and a stifled sob showed she was understood.

'Dear Louise,' she whispered, in tender accents; and the words, or rather the kind tone, overcame the proud, reticent heart, and sinking down on the grass, Louise gave way to a violent fit of weeping.

'It's my birthday,' she whispered; 'and a letter came from my mother, but the half was torn off: something that fat fool thought I should not see. Ah me! I can't help myself. I've imagined all manner of things, good and bad, but how can I tell what was in it? And I dare not ask,—I tried that once before, but shall not venture again. Oh, why did I come here? oh that I could get away! oh that I could escape!' and she tore up the grass in handfuls in her passionate but impotent rage.

'It must have been something about *him*,' she continued, growing a little calmer. 'This is the anniversary of the day we parted—my birthday. How happy I was that morning, how miserable before night! and, after all, it was only a lover's quarrel. It might have come all right but for my proud heart— What is it?' she ejaculated; for Cora had started, and given utterance to a stifled scream.

'Nothing,' said Cora; 'only,' she whispered, a frightened glance at the high wall near they were, 'I thought I saw a man's face

for a moment up there,—there it is again!’ she cried, letting her basket fall and scattering the fruit.

‘A man’s face!’ cried Louise, springing to her feet, and recovering all her composure in a moment. ‘Where? where? what was he like?’ she whispered.

‘Just above the old cross,’ said Cora, ignoring the second question; and fixing her eyes on the spot indicated, Louise stood motionless, with throbbing heart and quickened pulse, scarcely knowing herself what she was looking for.

But nothing appeared, and Louise again demanded what the face had been like; and on Cora declaring she did not know, and even hinting that she might have been mistaken, Louise’s choler rose.

‘You can surely tell whether he had black eyes or blue, dark hair or light?’ she cried, stamping her foot; but another scream from Cora made her look up again, and they both saw distinctly a man’s face, with the chin resting on the top of the wall above the old stone cross, which had been built into it. The next moment it had disappeared; but, ere it vanished, a small packet, tied with a string and having a stone attached to it, had fallen at Louise’s feet. To seize it and hide it was the work of a moment; and then

with flushed face and trembling hands she resumed her work.

‘I saw him,—it was he!’ she whispered, looking at Cora with an expression of happiness in her eyes which she had never seen there before, merry as Louise had often pretended to be. ‘He has come back,’ she continued, squeezing and spoiling, in her agitation, the fruit she was picking. ‘He went away, far away; he is a soldier,—he loves me still, else he never would have dared to come here. Mamma must have mentioned his name in the letter; I suspected as much. He loves me still, and he cannot have married: I heard he had.’

‘What matters it?’ said Cora, uttering the thought which had arisen in her mind at sight of the other’s joy; ‘he cannot marry a nun.’

All the happy, beaming light left Louise’s face, and an angry, reproachful glance shot from her dark eyes as Cora spoke.

‘You are right,’ she said bitterly, ‘he cannot marry a nun; but,’ she added, clasping her hands over her bosom, where the packet was hidden, ‘it is something to me to know that he loves me still. I suppose you never had a lover?’ she remarked, as she rapidly filled her basket, picking

the fruit all right with her now steady hands, anger having conquered her emotion.

'No,' said Cora, 'I never had a lover' (thinking, as she spoke, that if she had had one she would never have taken the veil). 'Forgive me, dear Louise!' she cried; 'it was cruel in me, though I only spoke the truth.'

'Forgive you!' said Louise, every feature softening again; 'I have nothing to forgive. Companions in misery should not take offence readily; and I am so happy, strange as it may seem to you, *mon ami*;' and she cast another eager glance at the top of the old cross, but, though they lingered near the spot till the allotted time for their task was past, they saw no more of the man's head.

'Why don't you open it?' asked Cora, as she followed Louise along the path.

'Hush!' she whispered; 'my fingers are burning to get at it, but I would not open it till night, till I am alone in my cell. No; not for all the world. If the Mother Superior were to spy it, it would be confiscated immediately,' and again she pressed her hand on the hidden packet.

As they went along the corridor, on their way to the kitchen with their baskets, they passed the Mother Superior's little parlour, and seeing that the room was empty, Louise peeped in. As she

did so, a pet linnet of the Abbess', confined in a cage hanging beside the open window, enlivened by the sunshine which streamed into the room, set up a merry lay. It was a sweet song, and for a few moments the two nuns stood listening to the melody; but it irritated Louise's already excited feelings, and she shook her fist at the little warbler.

'Poor, senseless little prisoner,' she muttered, 'singing in a cage. I could wring its head off!' and depositing her basket on the floor, she advanced into the room on tiptoe, putting her finger on her lip as a warning gesture to the terrified Cora. To open the door of the cage, and retreat swiftly and noiselessly to Cora's side, was the work of a moment, then, seizing hold of her basket, she stood ready to run, breathlessly watching the result.

The bird's song suddenly ceased, and the little head was seen peeping from the open door, as though doubtful what the new state of matters might mean; but after reconnoitering, first with one eye and then with the other, it hopped back to its perch again.

Louise actually stamped her foot with vexation, whilst Cora whispered in an agony of fear, 'Oh, shut him in,—she'll be here!'

At that moment a bird, sitting on a tree outside, commenced to carol merrily; and the next, the cage was empty, the prisoner had escaped.

‘Bravo!’ muttered Louise triumphantly, with the tears standing in her eyes; but as they fled along the narrow passage, Cora heard sounds of smothered laughter, for Louise was chuckling at the idea of the Mother Superior’s chagrin at the loss of her feathered favourite. As they were disposing of the fruit, she kept up a running fire of whispers.

‘That bird shall be my omen,’ she said. ‘If it comes back to its cage, or is caught, it will be bad; if it is never more heard of, it will be good.’

‘What can she mean? She surely can’t be thinking of running away,’ thought Cora, the very possibility of such an idea sending a thrill like electricity through her frame.

‘Poor little slave!’ continued Louise, ‘it had been so long a prisoner it did not know what liberty was; and even when it got the chance, it lingered in its cell, till the voice of a friend outside brought it to its senses, broke the spell, acted like a charm, and gave it courage to spread its wings once more. And need I fear its return now? now, when it has tasted the sweets of liberty? now,

when it has recovered its birthright? No, it will never return; the omen will be good.'

'What can you mean, Louise?' whispered Cora; '*you* are not thinking of escaping!'

'Why not?' rejoined Louise; 'the sight of that face on the top of the wall has acted on me like a charm too; but it all depends on what he says here,' she added with a sigh, as she touched the concealed packet.

'But you are a nun,' said Cora hesitatingly.

'Yes, I am a nun,' said Louise, with a scornful laugh; 'but you may depend upon it, no pious scruples on that score will detain me here against my will. Yes, I am the bride of heaven; I have taken the veil; I have'—

'Hush, oh hush!' cried Cora; 'you are speaking too loud; you may be overheard, and then'—

'Ay, and then,' said Louise gloomily, and again sinking her voice to a whisper, 'then all hope of freedom would be gone, bolts and bars—and—but I will be silent and prudent; I will take the hint, dear Cora,' and she immediately relapsed into unbroken silence, though, when an opportunity occurred, she cast on Cora glances full of meaning, which she was not slow to interpret: they spoke of new hopes, of revived motives, of the prospect of freedom; of the strength

of a determined purpose to escape from a living tomb; the past almost already blotted out; the future, uncertain as it was, looked forward to with impatience. Yes; Louise was no longer a nun; she had again become a woman, with all a woman's hopes and fears.





CHAPTER II.

MARGUERITE'S STORY.

‘What is all righteousness that men devise ?
What—but a sordid bargain for the skies ?’



CORA saw little of Louise during the few following weeks, for Sister Marguerite was seized with sudden illness, and the office of nursing her was deputed to Cora, who, however, received several secret hints, that though the Mother Superior openly accused no one of being accessory to the escape of her favourite, she had evidently fixed upon the real culprit, and was subjecting Louise to all the petty annoyances and small insults which suggest themselves to mean, unprincipled minds unfortunately possessed of power over their fellow-creatures.

‘She is only waiting her time,—playing with me like a cat with a mouse,’ whispered Louise on one of the few occasions on which she got a

chance to speak to Cora ; ' but the bird has not returned, the prisoner has not been recaptured ; the omen is good, and I can bear it all without a murmur.'

She said no more, for Louise had suddenly become prudent, and she knew that a rash word was perhaps as much as her life was worth ; for liberty had become life to her, imprisonment death : she was plotting and planning, and a rash word overheard might undo all.

But the time came when she was obliged to take Cora to a certain extent into her confidence, for she was too generous to wish to escape alone ; and telling her she was making preparations for flight, she anxiously entreated her to risk all and accompany her.

' *He* has plotted, and I have planned,' she said, ' and it now rests with me to give the word. Dear Cora, do not hesitate ; it is worth the risk. We will take you with us to a land where, *he* says, if they dare to attempt to kidnap us, one cry for help will rally round us a host of brave hearts and strong arms, ready and willing to succour and defend us. Come, dear Cora,' and Louise twined her arms round her, and kissed her fondly in the dark, for it was a midnight stolen interview. For a moment Cora hesitated, her heart throbbing

wildly at the prospect of liberty ; but it was only for a moment, for she too was generous, and to leave Marguerite, whom she now loved more than ever—Marguerite, who, she feared, would never recover, who was so patient and uncomplaining, so grateful for the smallest kindness—was, she felt, impossible.

‘ You are very kind, dear Louise ; but I cannot leave Marguerite,’ she whispered with a sigh.

‘ Cannot leave Marguerite ! ’ ejaculated Louise. ‘ What is the short time you may be with her compared to being buried alive for the remainder of your life ? Marguerite will get another nurse after you are gone. Cora ! Cora ! you may never get another chance—you have not got a lover like me ; ’ and Louise sighed too, but hers was a happy sigh, and there was a touch of triumph in her tone which jarred on Cora’s nerves, rendered doubly sensitive by the strain put upon them.

‘ No,’ she said coldly, ‘ I have no lover to help me to escape ; but I love Marguerite, and cannot leave her.’

Louise stamped her foot and almost cried with vexation.

‘ I have risked much to give you the chance ; you’ll repent it after I am gone,’ she said ; and then, changing her tone, she coaxed and expostu-

lated and remonstrated till further colloquy was dangerous, and they parted, Louise wounded and disappointed, Cora grieved and sorrowful.

She saw no more of Louise, and started at every unusual sound, frightened lest the fugitive might be caught in the very act of escaping, or be pursued and brought back.

Sitting one morning half asleep, just as daylight was dimly dawning, and making visible the few articles of furniture in Marguerite's bare, comfortless cell, she became aware of a soft scratching on the other side of the door, close beside which she was sitting; and starting to her feet, she opened it with the soft, noiseless motion which had become habitual to her.

At the back of it stood a lady dressed in the height of the fashion of the period, a rich lace veil covering and concealing her face, whilst a large shawl was thrown gracefully over her arm. At sight of her, Cora stood transfixed with amazement; but the veil was thrown back, and she saw before her Louise, Sister Louise, no longer pale as death, but with eyes full of delight and a smile of triumph on her lips. She said not one word, but lifting her hand made a warning gesture, understood amongst the nuns as a mark of silence, and then, throwing her arms round Cora's neck,

she kissed her repeatedly ere she fled along the narrow passage, looking back as she turned the corner to wave a last farewell.

Poor Cora! never till that moment did she realize the extent of the sacrifice she had made, and her first impulse was a wild thought of risking all, leaving Marguerite, running after Louise, and escaping too. But it was only for a moment; and she returned to the cell, thankful that she had checked an impulse which might have betrayed Louise and marred her escape, and with contrite feelings toward the poor invalid, whose uneasy slumbers had fortunately been undisturbed.

For days afterwards, Cora held her breath and listened; but Marguerite's illness had reached its height, and, closely confined to the cell, she heard nothing for a time. Supposed to be absorbed in nursing, she escaped the ordeal through which each inmate of the convent was put when Louise's flight was discovered; and Marguerite's death being daily expected, her nurse was left unquestioned and unsuspected.

But Marguerite partially recovered, and lingered on week after week; and during these last weeks of her life, she and Cora opened their hearts to each other—only at intervals and stealthily, it is true, but with full confidence on both sides.

When Marguerite heard of Louise's escape, and saw that, but for her, Cora would have fled too, her grief was great, and Cora experienced a feeling of mortification at seeing, as she thought, her sacrifice unappreciated. But it was not so. Marguerite was truly grateful ; but though she never would have dreamt of escaping herself, the thought that she had been the innocent means of detaining an unwilling captive within the convent walls was anguish to her affectionate heart, and from that moment to effect Cora's escape became the ruling idea of her mind.

'Not before I die,' she would whisper, tenderly pressing Cora's hand, anxious that she should understand, that to have her with her during the remainder of her life was indeed a precious consolation.

Often did Cora know she was pondering over the chances of her escape ; and seeing that Marguerite not only thought it possible, but not unlawful, she began to entertain a hope that in some way or other it might be effected—a hope, faint, very faint, at first, but which gradually strengthened till it became tacitly understood between them.

It was during this time that Marguerite told in fragmentary snatches the story of her early life,

a story remembered by Cora in after years as a connected whole.

‘I was brought up,’ she said, ‘in the ancient city of Bourges, a city full of priests and scholars, the very atmosphere of which is redolent of piety and learning. We lived in an old château, Hubert and I, Louis and Marie; Hubert was my only brother, and Louis and Marie were our cousins. We were all orphans, and had been betrothed from our infancy, Louis to me, Marie to Hubert—an arrangement which promised a happy future, for, as we grew up, our hearts confirmed what had been fixed upon by our parents and guardians ere we ourselves had either wish or will in the matter. Louis and I were possessed of similar tastes and inclinations; we were grave, serious, and thoughtful, fond of study and meditation—the air of Bourges seeming to have inspired us both not only with a love of learning, but with deep and sincere sentiments of piety. Whilst, on the contrary, Hubert and Marie were gay and thoughtless, laughing and singing from morning to night, light-hearted and happy, living in the present, even as Louis and I were prone to live in the future, often more impressed by things unseen and eternal than things seen and temporal. But though thus differently constituted, we all

loved each other dearly, and were indeed a happy family. Hubert was a dear, affectionate, generous boy; so generous that our old servant Pierre used to say it was a good thing his ears were attached to his head, else he would have been sure to have given them away to somebody who needed them. He was about two years younger than Louis and I, but early assumed the office of champion in any childish quarrel with our playfellows of the neighbouring châteaux, laughingly declaring that Louis was nothing but a dreamer, and only fit for a priest. Louis quietly allowed him to fight our battles and maintain our rights, always interfering, however, when diplomacy became necessary, and then he proved a powerful ally.

‘But though Hubert seemed to us a merry, thoughtless fellow, who was incapable of entering into or appreciating our feelings, there was within him a deep under-current, which needed only circumstance and opportunity to develop itself; and when the time came, the stream welled forth pure and strong. True, he might not have our fine, metaphysical ideas, our dreamy, pietistic notions; but he had the spirit of a martyr, the heart of a hero, and when he was tried he was not found wanting. And he was tried, sorely tried; for, Cora, he became a Protestant!’

As Marguerite uttered the last word, her voice sank to a whisper, and in the same low tone Cora ejaculated, 'A Protestant!'

'Yes,' whispered Marguerite, 'Hubert became a Protestant; and no one who knew him doubted that the change was the result of deep, conscientious conviction, and from no mere caprice or love of novelty. He had everything to gain by remaining a Catholic, but lost everything by becoming a Protestant; and dreadful as I once thought it to have a heretic brother, my respect for him was increased rather than lessened by his adherence to what he believed was the path of duty. And though I still cling to the Church of my fathers, I have learned to regard those who differ from it with that charity which should pervade all those who have the same faith and hope. Cora, I have learned much since I came here, and I sometimes think that it has been better for me, and for others too, that I did retire from the world; for many a weary pillow I have watched by, and many a weary soul have I cheered and comforted with the words of eternal life; for, pious as I thought myself in the dear old château in Bourges, it was here that I first learned the true foundation of all piety. It was here that in secret I read a Bible which my poor

Marie had managed to secrete. It was Hubert's gift, and she valued and treasured it on that account, and on that account only; for its contents were regarded by her with mysterious fear, from having, she knew, been the means of his change of faith—a change which had not only separated her from her lover in this world, and driven her to take refuge in a convent, but which had, she believed, separated them for ever; for she had been taught that there was no salvation for heretics, no hope for any beyond the pale of the Church. My poor dear Marie! it almost broke my heart to see her pining away, her lively spirit broken by the very hopelessness of her situation; and to know that my own brother had been the cause did not lessen my grief. But death released her, and hers was a happy death-bed. She had none of the self-righteous difficulties which for a time oppressed and darkened my spirit, but thankfully accepted the offered cure for all her woes, gratefully rejoicing in the light which, though it had come too late for this world, not only shed a bright halo over that to which she was hastening, but took from death its sting and fear, and gave her the hope of meeting her lover in heaven. You must not suppose,' continued Marguerite, wiping her eyes, after a

pause, 'that though I say Hubert was the cause of poor Marie's immolation, that he was to blame. No, he would never of his own accord have broken off the match; but she was under the power of the priests, and her guardians too were not slow to represent to her in awful terms the guilt and danger she would incur in wedding a heretic; and her brother, he too— But I am not going to say anything against Louis,' said Marguerite, after hesitating for a moment or two. 'Whatever he did was from conscience, and he should not be judged harshly: let me rather tell you of Hubert, and how he became a Protestant.

'Our old servant, Pierre, was a descendant of one of the Huguenots who at one time took possession of Bourges, and Hubert was never weary listening to the old man's tales of the bravery and courage of these men, who suffered and still suffer with a faith and patience which must call forth even the admiration of their bitterest enemies. But though we knew that Hubert liked Pierre's company, we had no idea of the strong hold his talk had taken of the boy's mind. Well do I remember the day when it first dawned on me that some change was coming over my merry, thoughtless brother. It was Christmas time, and all the young people of Bourges were busily engaged in

decking out the various churches for the coming festival, and we four were amongst those who had divided the task of decorating our magnificent cathedral. We had either been lazier than the others, or had undertaken a larger portion of the work, for group after group finished their tasks, and we were left alone to finish ours.

"Where's Hubert?" cried Louis, as he twisted and untwisted a beautiful wreath of costly flowers which had been brought from our own conservatory. "I'm just spoiling this, and he has more skill and taste in his little finger than I have I believe in my whole body;" and he called out "Hubert! Hubert!" but no Hubert responded to the cry, and Marie, declaring he must have fallen asleep, volunteered to go in search of him. She returned in a few minutes with him, laughingly informing us she had found him leaning against a pillar, in a brown study, sleeping, she averred, with his eyes open.

"Look here, Hubert," cried Louis, holding up his half-finished wreath; and Hubert took it in hand. But though he finished it with his usual skill, I knew from his listless manner that the work had lost all interest for him.

Our tasks finished, we prepared to return home. It was late in the afternoon, and the dim religious light of the cathedral helped the gather-

ing twilight; but this only increased the beauty of the scene, and we stood for some minutes at the door looking back ere we left. Louis and I gazed in silence, but Marie was voluble in her exclamations of admiration and pleasure. It was she who had made the wreaths for the images and pictures, and she repeatedly called Hubert's attention to the beauty of her handiwork. His only reply was a smile, a sad smile.

"Hubert, what is the matter with you?" I cried, surprised and alarmed.

"Nothing, my dear sister," he said kindly; adding gravely, and with an evident effort, "I have been thinking of Him whom we profess to worship as equal with Jehovah, and yet whose birth we commemorate in this childish manner. Oh, if I knew Him to be *my* Saviour, *my* God, how differently would I serve Him! how differently would I honour Him! Nothing would be too much; it would be the sacrifice of a lifetime, the consecration of my whole being. Looking down now from the throne of His glory, how must He despise all this flummery"— He paused abruptly, for we were all staring at him, and turning hastily away, muttered something about having "forgotten himself."

'It was years after this before Hubert declared

himself a Protestant ; but I always look back on that day as the beginning of all our sorrows. Before his ultimate decision I had left the world and come here, refusing alike to listen to his arguments and brotherly entreaties,—wrapped in a mantle of spiritual pride of my own weaving. But before my poor Marie followed me to the convent, the veil had fallen from my eyes, and I would, if I could, have saved her from the fate of a nun. I was so placed that this was impossible ; but I have no scruples in trying to deliver *you*, Cora. I see things clearer now, and look upon assisting you to escape in the same light as delivering a slave, or an imprisoned bird or squirrel.’

‘But what became of Hubert ?’ asked Cora.

‘He suffered much in adhering to the course dictated by his conscience,’ said Marguerite. ‘He not only lost his bride, but all his worldly possessions, and is now earning his daily bread in a shop in Paris ; but I know that never for a moment has he regretted the choice he made. And, Cora, though Louis and I looked down from the heights of our spiritual infatuation upon him and Marie, I know now that they were both nearer the kingdom of heaven than we, who laboured so hard to attain to it ; and though Louis thought he was

sacrificing much, it was Hubert who was the true martyr. Louis is in the sphere most agreeable to him; and he will need all the self-denying principles of his theory to counteract the effect of the adulation which, as a preacher, follows him wherever he goes.'

But Cora cared more to hear about Hubert than Louis. The picture of the bright merry boy had made a deep impression on her mind, and whatever Marguerite let fall about him was eagerly remembered and cherished, and he became a hero in her eyes. Not that Cora had any sympathy with his religious peculiarities; it was the results and not the motives which attracted her, and whatever had been the moving cause, her admiration would have been the same. Sitting by Marguerite's bedside, she would close her eyes and raise pictures before her mental vision, in which Hubert played the conspicuous part. She saw him a bright, beautiful boy, fighting his companions' battles in the gardens of the old family château at Bourges, and rejoiced in the victories which she always accorded to him. She saw him grave and thoughtful in the old cathedral, uttering his indignant protest against frivolity in the name of religion; and she tried to imagine her hero as he was now patiently labouring at some uncon-

genial work, grave and sad, perhaps, but courageous still.

Whilst Cora was thus nursing her hero-worship, the dying Marguerite, composed and resigned in all that appertained to herself, was anxiously deliberating on the best means for her escape from the convent. By slow and painful efforts she wrote a letter to her old lover, which she warned Cora to secrete and preserve with the utmost care.

'Louis will help you for my sake,' she said; 'he is powerful, and is too noble to betray you. Tell him'— But Marguerite was very weak, and paused, overcome with emotion, and though she gave Cora advice as to the best means of effecting her escape, she said little more, save what was absolutely necessary.

At intervals she communicated to her the fact that the porteress was a sister of their old servant, Pierre, a woman who had followed her to the convent for no other reason than to be near her. Some kindly service, some affectionate act, too openly displayed, had roused the angry suspicions of the Mother Superior, jealous as she was bound to be of any infringement of the discipline of the convent; and, the punishment falling upon poor Suzette, Marguerite had anxiously avoided all

intercourse with her, and had expressly forbidden any approach to intimacy, a prohibition which was broken by both every favourable opportunity which occurred. But during her illness, Suzette had been watched and guarded. Both she and Marguerite were suspected of Protestant tendencies, and to keep them separate was considered indispensably necessary. But Marguerite declared with tears that she must see her old friend before she died, and that it was on her she chiefly relied to assist Cora to escape.

The next few weeks were always remembered by Cora as a feverish dream. A midnight interview between the porteress and Marguerite, during which, notwithstanding their grief at parting, the chances of her escape were discussed and planned, Marguerite proposing that Suzette herself should seize the opportunity, now that all motive for remaining in the convent would be over,—a proposal spurned by the apparently petrified but still warm-hearted woman, who declared that, Marguerite dead, her only hope in life would be to sleep beside her in death; then Marguerite's death, and all the attendant circumstances of rite and ceremonial, followed by a feeling of helpless isolation, which made escape seem to Cora a despairing, forlorn hope; then a reaction, which

roused her to hope and activity once more, and which ended in finding herself one morning outside the convent walls, fleeing as for life, her convent dress hidden by a large cloak procured for her, she knew not how, by Suzette, who had also provided her with a small sum of money. Home was her first thought, for surely her mother would not hesitate to receive and welcome her, and keep her arrival a secret till she had found a secure place in which to hide. And home she went, strangely awkward in her recovered freedom ; starting at every new object she met by the way, more especially when she saw a form approaching which bore any resemblance to that of a priest. Many times she deviated from the road, hiding behind trees and hedges, often when there was no real cause of alarm ; and the shades of evening were closing around her ere she reached, with throbbing heart, the gate which was built into one end of the high wall which surrounded her mother's house. Before it she paused to take breath, the sight of the windows of the house as she peeped in bringing tears to her eyes, which prevented her seeing any form which might be flitting past them. Standing thus, in the act of raising her hand to take hold of the rope which was attached to the large house-bell, she was startled by the sound of

a coming footstep; and drawing back into the shadow round the corner, she saw, with a terror which blanched her face and took the power either to move or flee from her limbs, the well-remembered figure of the family confessor; and with all the self-consciousness of one who had so much at stake, she never doubted but that he had heard of her escape, and had come to inform her mother of it. But though she saw him, he did not see her; and after a strong pull at the bell, he fortunately turned round the other way, as he waited for admittance.

Ah, that bell! how the sound of it went to Cora's heart, bringing back, with painful echoes, the familiar memories of her childhood; for bells are like human faces and human voices, no two are alike; and as Cora heard it, the first time since she had left her home to return no more, a host of incidents connected with its tones rose up before her with every toll.

But the gate opened, and the priest turned round again and stalked in; and as Cora caught a full view of the profile of his face, her eyes were suddenly opened to the fact that the sharp, aquiline nose, the deep-set, mysterious eyes, and the cruel mouth had had more to do with her entering the convent than she had ever before suspected. Yes;

the web had been skilfully woven round her, the victim had been blinded with consummate art, and the sacrifice had appeared so voluntary, even to herself, as to disarm all suspicion of persuasion, far less of coercion. And now here was this man, arrived before her, still the director of her mother's and sister's consciences, still the censor and judge of their every action; and how would she, the poor fugitive, be received in the circumstances? Alas! Cora scarcely took time to answer the question, but turned away, sick and giddy, to seek protection and shelter elsewhere.





CHAPTER III.

THE PRIEST AND PREACHER.

'The plea of works, as arrogant and vain,
Heav'n turns from with abhorrence and disdain.'

IN a large but somewhat low-roofed chamber, at the top of a house in one of the faubourgs of Paris, a priest was sitting absorbed in meditation. Leaning back in his chair, he seemed oppressed with his thoughts, for his brows were knitted and his lips compressed as with pain,—as though the very act of thinking had become a weary obligation, which had strained his mental powers, till the strings of the machine were so strained and rendered so sensitive as to destroy the very end he had in view. In a corner of the room, a surplice lay on a *prie-dieu*, whilst on the wall directly opposite where the priest was sitting, the curtain had been drawn back from before a painting of the crucifixion,

hung above an altar with a crucifix draped in black; for the day was Good Friday, on which all good Catholics are supposed to be in a state of mourning. The priest was in the prime of life, and no one could look at him without being impressed by the peculiarly intellectual expression of his countenance, which, at the same time, bore marks of the gracious benevolence of his character and disposition. Suddenly, as though struck with some bright new idea, he pushed back his chair, started to his feet, and striding with eager footsteps across the floor, he opened the door of a small cupboard, and having taken from it a violin and its bow, he played (after a few preliminary scrapes and flourishes) a merry dance tune, to which he capered about with right good-will. Thus occupied, he did not hear slow, heavy footsteps ascending the wooden staircase, but paused abruptly as an old man carrying a large black bag entered the apartment, and stood at the door, rooted to the spot, staring at the dancing ecclesiastic with open-eyed, open-mouthed amazement, if not horror.

‘My good friend,’ said the priest, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and a smile of comic amusement playing on his lips, ‘I see you are somewhat surprised to see me thus; but in study-

ing my discourse, I found myself in too low spirits to do my subject justice in the delivery, and have been trying the effect of a lively measure and a little exercise. I am happy to say that the remedy has been successful, and that I am now ready to accompany you ;' and replacing the violin in its place in the cupboard, he prepared to set out with the attendant, whose duty it was to carry his vestments to church, and render him any necessary service, and who, as he carefully folded the surplice, cast occasional wondering glances at the priest, as though doubting whether Father Louis and his senses had not, for the time being, parted company.*

Ready to depart, he left the room, followed by his still wondering attendant, but had only descended a few steps, when a female form, enveloped in a cloak, rushed up and fell at his feet, ejaculating in pitiful accents of agonized entreaty, 'Save me, father, save me !'

Obeying the first impulse of a noble heart, the priest raised her in his arms, as he would have done some poor wounded bird or panting, pursued leveret; and springing up the steps, he carried her into his chamber, taking the precaution

* This anecdote is related of Bourdaloue, the celebrated French preacher.

to lock the door and keep out the pursuers he imagined were in full cry at her heels, and leaving the old church officer more surprised and panic-stricken than ever. There, to his dismay, he found that she had fainted; and when roused by the plentiful supply of cold water which he poured upon her face, Cora (for it was she) saw, from the terror which mingled with the compassion expressed in his eyes, that he had thought her dead or dying.

‘My poor child,’ he said with a sigh of relief, ‘have no fear; whatever may have been your crime, rest assured that I will not deliver you up. You are as safe with me as in the sanctuary of the altar.’

Poor Cora! she had never dreamt of being suspected of being a guilty culprit fleeing from justice. It was the last drop in her already overflowing cup; but the torrent of tears which the priest’s words called forth relieved at once her burning brain and bursting heart. She forgot that the generous chivalry of the man, which made it a point of honour not to betray the woman who evidently reposed implicit trust in him, might give way before the sacred duty of the priest, when he heard she was a nun, who had broken her irrevocable vows, and been guilty of a

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to lock the door and keep out the pursuers he imagined were in full cry at her heels, and leaving the old church officer more surprised and panic-stricken than ever. There, to his dismay, he found that she had fainted; and when roused by the plentiful supply of cold water which he poured upon her face, Cora (for it was she) saw, from the terror which mingled with the compassion expressed in his eyes, that he had thought her dead or dying.

‘My poor child,’ he said with a sigh of relief, ‘have no fear; whatever may have been your crime, rest assured that I will not deliver you up. You are as safe with me as in the sanctuary of the altar.’

Poor Cora! she had never dreamt of being suspected of being a guilty culprit fleeing from justice. It was the last drop in her already overflowing cup; but the torrent of tears which the priest’s words called forth relieved at once her burning brain and bursting heart. She forgot that the generous chivalry of the man, which made it a point of honour not to betray the woman who evidently reposed implicit trust in him, might give way before the sacred duty of the priest, when he heard she was a nun, who had broken her irrevocable vows, and been guilty of a

ing my discourse, I found myself in too low spirits to do my subject justice in the delivery, and have been trying the effect of a lively measure and a little exercise. I am happy to say that the remedy has been successful, and that I am now ready to accompany you ;' and replacing the violin in its place in the cupboard, he prepared to set out with the attendant, whose duty it was to carry his vestments to church, and render him any necessary service, and who, as he carefully folded the surplice, cast occasional wondering glances at the priest, as though doubting whether Father Louis and his senses had not, for the time being, parted company.*

Ready to depart, he left the room, followed by his still wondering attendant, but had only descended a few steps, when a female form, enveloped in a cloak, rushed up and fell at his feet, ejaculating in pitiful accents of agonized entreaty, 'Save me, father, save me !'

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heinous crime against that Church the interests of which he was bound to defend even to the last drop of his blood, and that the more conscientious and trustworthy he was, the more anxious would he be to deliver her up to justice; and, again falling at his feet, she declared, as well as her sobs and tears permitted, that she was no guilty thief or murderer, but a poor innocent nun, who had fled from her convent, and come to him for succour and protection, thereby placing him in a predicament more awkward than he had ever experienced before. Gently raising the poor girl, he placed her on the *fauteuil*, in which he had been reclining whilst studying his discourse, and with a darkened brow began to pace the chamber from end to end, with hasty, impatient footsteps.

‘How came you to me?’ he asked sternly, as he suddenly paused opposite the worn-out, trembling girl.

Then Cora drew from her bosom the carefully-cherished letter of Sister Marguerite, which in her agitation she had for a time forgotten, and silently placed it in his hands. He took it somewhat impatiently, but at sight of the handwriting he became deadly pale, and as he read the opening sentences, the letter fell from his hands

and he sank into a chair. For a few moments there was a dead silence, and Cora, stealing a scared glance at him, saw him clasping his hands and raising his eyes to heaven, whilst his lips trembled with unspoken words of prayer. But accustomed to conquer emotion and to stifle feeling, he speedily regained his composure, and lifting poor Marguerite's blurred and blotted pages, he read and re-read them with eager interest. The letter was as follows:—

'DEAR LOUIS,—Ere this reaches you, the birds will be singing above my head in the convent graveyard, but I shall not hear them; and the convent bell will toll wearily as of old, but it shall no longer annoy me; for I shall be safe, where the weary are at rest, in that New Jerusalem which you and I, two romantic, visionary children, used to dream and talk so much about,—making airy, fancy pictures, coloured by our own childish, glowing imaginations,—and to obtain an entrance into which, we two, scarce yet grown man and woman, parted for ever—you to become a priest, and I a nun. It sends a pang through my heart still, Louis, to remember that parting; and I am foolish enough to hope that you may remember its agony too. Ah, Louis! what a mistake we made in the pride of our hearts, thinking we were doing God

service by the very pain we suffered! What an insult from the creature to the Creator! Dear Louis, I have much to say, but have neither strength nor opportunity to say it, and must hasten on. I have learned here that the salvation for which we in all sincerity resolved to work and fight with self-denying zeal, and to gain which we gave up the world and the world's joys, is not a reward either of holy living or self-sacrificing deeds, but the gift of the God of love. I am convinced that you too, Louis, have attained to the same precious faith which now sustains me in the near prospect of death; that you are one of those who worship God in the spirit, rejoice in Jesus Christ, and have no confidence in the flesh; and that, though through a mistaken piety we have been separated in this world, we shall meet above, where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Forgive me, Louis; I had no thought when I began to write of opening up the old wound, but the very fact that I was again speaking to you has led me on thus far.

'If this letter ever reaches you, it will be brought by a young girl whom I am anxious to save from my fate. Let no conscientious scruple deter you from befriending her. Even suppose a monastic

life right and proper (which now, lying on my death-bed, I declare to be a delusion and a snare of Satan himself), *she* has no vocation for it—far less, Louis, than I had, who have never ceased to regret the step I took. And, Louis, if my example have no influence upon you, let the voice of our poor broken-hearted Marie cry aloud from her grave to save another from the consequences of a like mistake. When, in the agony of her heart at the separation from her lover, she came to you as a brother and a priest, saying she was sick of the world, instead of giving her time to recover from the blow, you, actuated, I have no doubt, by conscientious motives and a real desire for her spiritual good, encouraged and nursed her half-formed intention of taking the veil; and before the reaction of her grief had come, she was immured in a convent for life, and her splendid dowry was in the coffers of the Church. Ah, Louis! you did not know it perhaps, but pride in the sacrifice of a sister might have a share in the motives which actuated you. But I am wandering again, and again you must forgive me; one gets wonderfully clear-eyed and plain-spoken when earth is behind and eternity so near. I charge you, Louis, save this girl; deliver her not up to the priests; send her not back to her

motioning the old man to precede him, he locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and slowly descended the stairs. Instead of feeling alarmed by this proceeding, Cora heard the key turn in the lock with a sigh of relief; she had implicit confidence in the priest, a confidence derived from Marguerite; and the fact that he had made a prisoner of her gave her a feeling of safety and security. Now that she felt safer than she had done since she left the convent, her wearied body asserted its claims, and she gladly availed herself of the priest's hospitality; and finding, as he had said, a repast ready, she ate like a hungry child, and then throwing herself on a couch, she rested her cheek on her hand and fell sound asleep. Whilst Cora slept, Father Louis preached, and, eloquent as he always was, he was that day pronounced by general consent to have surpassed himself. Though his text was taken from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, his real text was Marguerite's letter, and the sermon was a passionate outburst of inner feeling. He preached like a man possessed, though he felt like one in a dream, or like one suddenly roused from slumber. Old memories crowded thick upon him: the gentle, beautiful girl with whom he had been on terms of endearing intimacy from his very infancy, and

whom he had never seen since when, in the spirit of pseudo-martyrdom, he had been present at what he considered her heavenly betrothal, seemed suddenly to have started up before him, with the sad, imploring eyes with which she had been wont to regard him when first he hinted his wish to become a priest. For though Marguerite had, with the reticence of a noble, generous nature, spoken of the sacrifice as mutual, he knew that, but for him, she never would have taken the veil; and recalled with a bitter pang the half condemnatory, half triumphant feelings which had possessed him when he discovered how much it cost her to relinquish him. Thus roused, he forgot the Catholic in the Christian, the priest in the man, and preached Justification by Faith as clearly as the Apostle Paul himself, earnestly entreating his hearers to put no confidence in any good works or sacrifice of their own, but to put all their trust in the one great Sacrifice, and in that alone.

But, his sermon finished, the excitement over, a reaction set in, and Father Louis left the church with a bowed down, humbled head, and with his hat slouched over his downcast eyes. He turned away in the opposite direction from that in which he had come, and made his way towards the other end of Paris by a circuitous, roundabout route.

He might have been anxious to escape observation, or it might be simply the Jesuit education, which made it an unconscious habit with him never to take a straight path where a crooked one could be found; either way, he took the long road and avoided the short one.





CHAPTER IV.

THE MERCHANT.

' If done beneath Thy laws,
Even servile labour shines ;
Hallow'd is toil, if this the cause,
The meanest work divine.'

THIS destination was a small shop in an obscure faubourg, and as he approached the door he hesitated and lingered, and drew his hat still farther over his brow, and wrapped his cloak still closer round him. At length he summoned up courage, and with hasty steps entered the shop, pausing for a moment on the threshold to cast a hasty glance round the interior, till it rested on the face of a man, evidently the master of the shop, who was busily engaged adding up a long row of figures, and who, as the priest advanced and stood before him, said, without looking up, ' Pardon, one moment.'

He was an erect, wiry figure, rather below than

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He was an erect, wiry figure, rather below than

above the middle size, with a fine, expressive countenance, the marked features of which were a Roman nose and eagle eyes, their sharp expression being tempered and softened by the almost womanly tenderness and sweetness of the small mouth and chin. He was clad in a complete suit of fine grey cloth, having on the right sleeve a broad band of black crape, on which was embroidered in white silk, 'A MEMOIRE M. A.'

'Now, sir,' he said, as he finished his task and laid down his pen, turning respectfully towards his supposed customer with a pleasant smile on his lips,—a smile which roused mingled sensations in the heart of Father Louis, recalling, as it did, the memory of another face, very similar to the one before him in expression if not in features.

But, instead of giving an order, the priest removed his hat, and, with a melancholy smile, held out his hand. For a moment the merchant seemed petrified with astonishment; then his eyes brightened and sparkled, and seizing the offered hand he shook it repeatedly, crying in eager, excited tones, 'It's Louis!' adding, 'I was there! I was there!'

'Where?' asked the priest, equally surprised in turn, but making considerably less outward show of his astonishment.

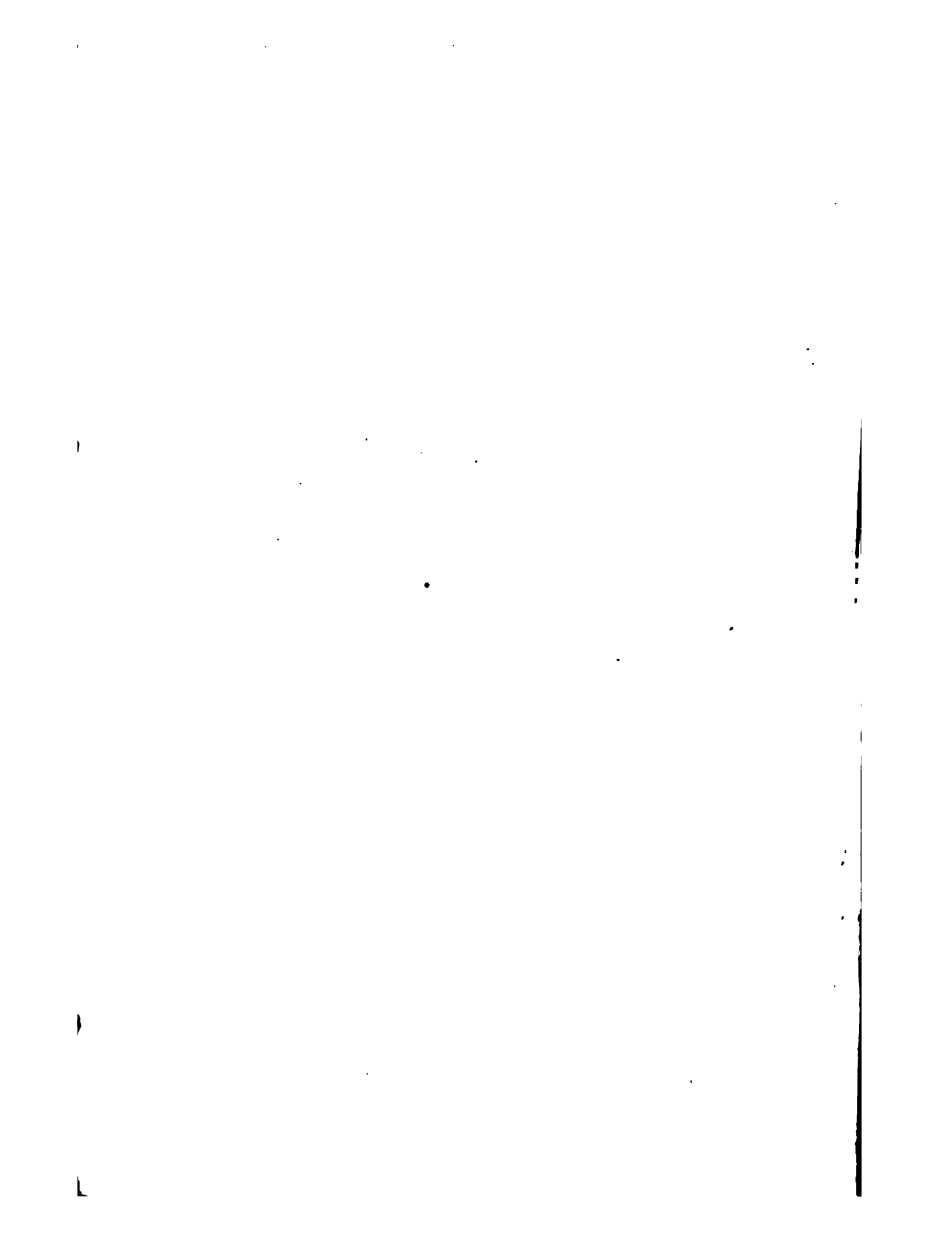
‘In the church!’ cried the other. ‘I have just come from it; yes, I was there! I heard your sermon, Louis; it was magnificent, charming, superb! How the old walls rung with the old gospel!—and it was a Catholic priest who preached, a Jesuit! Bah! the more shame to him,’ he cried, his mood suddenly changing as he threw away the hand he held, a contemptuous, withering sneer on his lips and an indignant glance in his eyes. ‘What right had you to preach justification by faith, you who teach, or should teach, the very opposite doctrine? How can you remain a priest? a Jesuit? Have you any conscience left, Louis?’

‘Had you preached that sermon in other circumstances,’ he continued, without waiting for a reply, and pacing the narrow limits of his shop with quick, impatient footsteps, ‘it might, nay, it must have done good; but the gay butterfly ladies and the fine perfumed gentlemen who listened to you so attentively, who wiped their eyes when you finished, and whispered to each other that Father Louis had surpassed himself to-day, and that it had been better than a play,—would they not, think you, nurtured as they have been, apply justification by faith in their own way, and retire from the church resolved to continue in sin that grace might abound?’

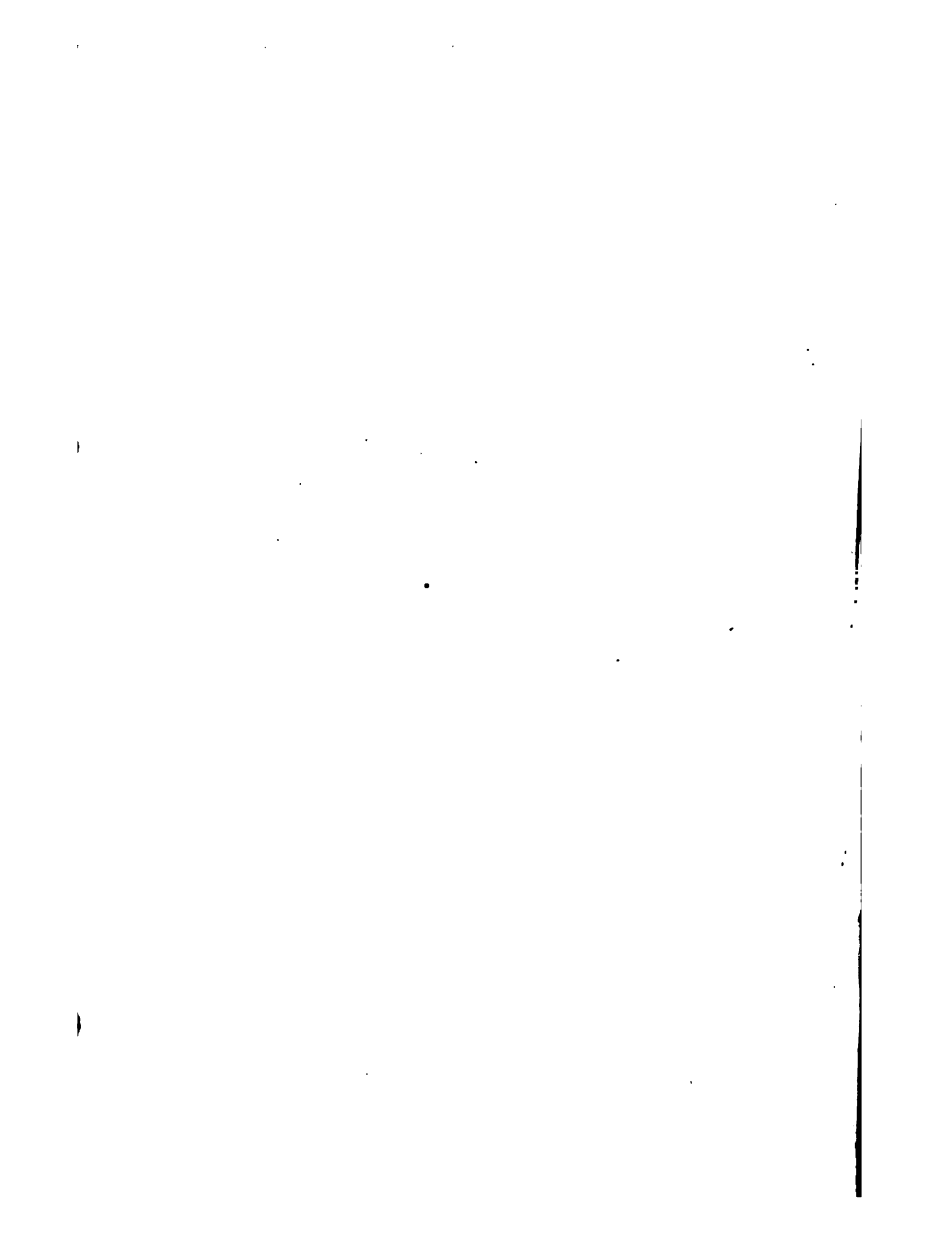


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SISTER CORA.



SISTER CORA.

MURRAY AND GIBB, EDINBURGH,
PRINTERS TO HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE.



SISTER CORA.

A Tale of the Eighteenth Century.

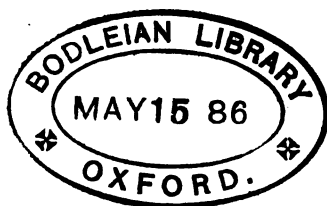
BY THE AUTHOR OF

'CARRY MORGAN,' 'SAM SILVA,' 'BIDDY THE MAID OF ALL WORK,' ETC.

'Man in society is like a flower
Blown in its native bed; 'tis there alone
His faculties, expanded in full bloom,
Shine out—there alone reach their proper use.'

EDINBURGH:
WILLIAM OLIPHANT AND CO.
1876.

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CONTENTS.



INTRODUCTION.

'L'ETOILE DE MA VIE,'	7
---------------------------------	---

CHAPTER I.

THE THREE NUNS,	12
---------------------------	----

CHAPTER II.

MARGUERITE'S STORY,	34
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

THE PRIEST AND PREACHER,	54
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

THE MERCHANT,	67
-------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

THE PRIEST AND THE PROTESTANT,	80
--	----





SISTER CORA.



INTRODUCTION.

‘L’ETOILE DE MA VIE.’

MY grandfather was a fine old gentleman of the old school. He wore powder in his hair, knee-breeches, black silk stockings, and silver buckles in his shoes, broad lace ruffles half covering his long white hands, and a frill of the same costly material peeping out from between the edges of his black satin waistcoat. His manner was polite and punctilious to a fault,—if politeness could be a fault in one who was at the same time so upright and sincere, so kind and amiable, so generous and tender-hearted, that everybody both respected and loved him. His grandchildren were no exception to the general rule.

To them he was an object of reverential affection, from the time when, released from their nurse's arms, he danced them on the point of his toe, till he initiated them into the mysteries of the French language, of which he was completely master, and which he liked to teach them,—a love which they retain for his memory; a love increased rather than lessened by the fact that the place which once knew him now knows him no more.

His exquisite French pronunciation was due to his grandmother, who was a Frenchwoman, and whose memory he cherished with an almost idolatrous affection; for his mother had died when he was very young, and his grandmother had supplied her place, and been a mother indeed to him, loving him with a double love not only for his own sake, but for the sake of her whom she had lost. His grandfather too was French, but being much older than his wife, he had died when she was still a woman in her prime, and when his grandson was a mere boy; old enough, however, to remember his neat, slight figure, his bright eyes, sparkling with all the fire of his youth, his beautiful silvery curls, and the lessons of piety, honour, and scrupulous morality which had sunk so deep into the boy's mind, and had no doubt helped to form his character. But though he remembered his grandfather,

the recollection was but faint compared to that which he cherished of his grandmother. '*L'etoile de ma vie,*' he was wont to call her to us children, who had some difficulty in calculating the exact degree of relationship in which she stood to us; and though he had loved his wife, our grandmother, with tender, chivalrous affection, and mourned her loss to the end of his days, I believe that in his old age the memory of his second mother was uppermost in his thoughts.

At any rate, it was of her he talked most to his grandchildren, and they were never wearied listening to his reminiscences of her. According to him, she was not only the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but the best he had ever known; the former opinion being unanimously confirmed by one and all, when, at rare times and as an extra reward for good behaviour or attention during our French lesson, we were shown a miniature portrait of her, exquisitely painted on ivory; whilst the latter we were equally ready to endorse, because dear grandpapa was so very good himself.

Born during the reign of Louis XIV., she had been a contemporary of the gifted, pious Pascal, the amiable, saintly Fenelon, the eloquent Bossuet, and the no less eloquent Bourdaloue, who was the favourite preacher of Louis XIV.,

the French Tillotson, the orator admired alike by Catholics and Protestants,—who, though a Jesuit, was a frank and upright man; though a priest, a pattern of morality; though the popular favourite of a dissolute Court, a faithful expounder of the Scriptures; even that same Louis Bourdaloue who, in the zenith of his fame, retired into private life, that he might devote his every gift and faculty to the relief and succour of suffering humanity. She had been in her youth a Roman Catholic; and that she had been a nun, who, weary of her convent life, had hazarded all and made her escape, raised her in our eyes to the position of a kind of holy heroine. Had we been Catholics, we would, no doubt, have made a saint of her—our Catholic ancestry and consequent associations helping, perhaps, the feelings with which we regarded her memory, and giving her the sacred niche which she still holds in our thoughts.

‘Grandpapa, you should write your grandmother’s story and put it in a book,’ I remarked one day, after he had showed me (her namesake and his prime favourite) the lovely portrait of her he called, ‘L’etoile de ma vie.’

‘I’ll leave that to you, Cora darling,’ he replied, fondly smoothing my rebellious curls.

He was only jesting, I believe, but, child-like,

I took all he said for earnest, and the idea never left me; it grew with my growth, and strengthened with my strength, till it found expression in the following pages, under the title of SISTER CORA.





CHAPTER I.

THE THREE NUNS.

‘ Open the cages,
Let the birds flee ;
Down with the convents,
Set the nuns free.’

SISTER CORA was a nun, who had renounced, or had professed to renounce, the world, with all its pomps, vanities, and pleasures. Poor Cora! she had resolved to take the veil in a mad fit of religious enthusiasm, and now the impulse which prompted her to immure herself for life in a convent, and which supported her during the necessary probationary trials, had passed away, and her heart was beating and throbbing and panting for the liberty she had despised, even like that of the poor imprisoned bird, which throws itself in mad despair against the wires of its cage. Only twelve months before, she had been so proud to become the

‘bride of heaven,’ and now her bosom was the seat of anything but heavenly emotions; for she hated everybody within the convent walls, from the fat, important abbess, down to the grim old portress, who looked as though she had been buried for a century and been resuscitated for want of a more fitting Cerberus.

But no! Cora did not hate everybody, for there was gentle, pious Sister Marguerite, whom she might pity, but certainly could not hate; indeed, she almost loved her,—at least, she might have loved her, had she not been so thoroughly miserable herself and full of self-pity, to the exclusion of other feelings. And there was Sister Louise, too, wicked Sister Louise, who made game behind backs of everything and everybody, and who forced Cora to laugh sometimes, sad and sick at heart as she really was. But poor Cora might be sick and sad till her very heart broke within her; she had become a nun of her own free-will, and a nun, she knew, she must remain for life; and she shuddered as she thought of that life spent as she was now spending it.

But she knew that there was no hope, no chance of escape, no glimmer of light, however faint, in the distant future, to sustain and cheer her in the present days of darkness. No; there was nothing

for Cora but a dreary, numb despair, mingled with vain regrets for what she had thrown away, and for what she might have been. Where now were the heavenly aspirations she had considered as so many proofs of her vocation for a holy life? where the direct communion with heaven which she had expected to enjoy, secluded from the world and free from its temptations and anxieties? Gone, all gone! and nothing left behind but the dust and ashes of an extinguished enthusiasm.

‘Why did you come here?’ Louise had asked in a whisper, as one morning they knelt side by side, and she saw the tears dropping from Cora’s eyes on the stone pavement of the chapel; and, ‘Why, oh, why did I come here?’ was now the constant wail of Cora’s famished heart. But, alas! she was *in*, and *out* she could not get.

There was no help, no hope for Cora, nothing but the same weary round of monotonous duties; saying prayers, whilst she did not pray; counting beads, whilst in her heart she despised it as childish mummary; performing acts of menial drudgery which she disliked and loathed; confessing to the priest, whilst her whole soul rose in rebellion at being compelled to do so; and, in fact, looking on herself as a lost, sacrificed one,—the knowledge, too, that no one was to blame but herself for the choice

she had made for life, making it all the more difficult to bear. Yes, nobody but herself ; for had not her friends one and all anxiously opposed her wishes, and entreated her to renounce her intentions ere it was too late ? Her mother, her dear widowed mother, good pious Catholic though she was, had wept and implored in vain, and had only ceased to remonstrate after a long private interview with the family confessor ; but though after that conference she had kept silence on the subject, Cora could not forget that her wistful, pleading eyes had said more than words ; and a great choking sob would almost suffocate her, as she remembered how, from the heights of her spiritual pride, she had looked down upon the yearnings of that mother's heart. And her sister, the tender, clinging, affectionate Theresa, how was it possible, Cora thought now, that she could resist *her* entreaties, and the tears with which she had almost blinded herself ? Alas ! she had been carried away by pride ; and bitterly she regretted her obstinacy, and found her punishment more than she could bear. She had discovered her mistake only too soon ; for, from the moment that the last link which bound her to the world without was severed, the enthusiasm which had till then sustained and blinded her had gradually

died away. She awoke from her dream to find herself a prisoner for life; and this became the ruling idea of her mind, the never-lost-sight-of fact, which poisoned every thought and embittered every feeling.

Of course Cora confessed all this to the priest, old Father Chatillon; and the old man, who had listened to many similar revelations from home-sick girls, who had either gradually become reconciled to their fate or found early graves in the convent graveyard, gave her absolution and inflicted mild and varied penances, sighing as he did so, and muttering to himself, 'Poor child! time will either kill or cure her.'

'What! penance again,' said Sister Louise to Cora one morning; 'why *do* you confess so much?'

'Confess!' said Cora; 'do you not confess everything?'

Louise made no reply, but gave her shoulders an expressive shrug.

'Not confess!' thought Cora; 'what a relief that would be!'

'You ask if I don't confess everything,' said Louise, coming very close, and speaking in a whisper; 'what a start the father would get if he saw right down into *my* heart;' and she laughed

a bitter, scornful laugh, though there was a note of sadness in it, which touched a sympathetic chord in Cora's heart.

'Why did *you* come here?' she asked in turn.

She was still more surprised and startled by the effect of her question on Sister Louise, whose face flushed scarlet, and then became deadly pale, as she turned away without replying. But she came back, and laying her hands on Cora's shoulders, she looked into her eyes with a wild, mournful stare, which fascinated and frightened her.

'I came here,' she whispered, 'because I quarrelled with my lover; and we parted to meet no more. Ah me, ah me! I thought to punish him by taking the veil, and I found out, when too late, that I had only punished myself.'

The anguish depicted on Louise's face, and the wailing tone of her voice, touched a chord in Cora's heart, and roused feelings which had of late been petrified within her. Throwing her arms round her neck, she murmured kind words of sympathy and pity, and was surprised by the ready response with which they were received.

Hugging her to her bosom, Louise whispered, 'I pitied you before, but I love you now, dear, dear Cora;,' but the next moment she turned hastily away, as though ashamed of the unwonted

They were standing together before one of the graves in the convent graveyard, having been occupied during the morning in weeding the flower borders which surrounded and ornamented the graves of the buried sisters,—a task performed by the nuns in turn, but which none of them liked except Marguerite, who seemed to enjoy the occupation almost as much as her favourite one of nursing. The grave at their feet was that of a nun who had died several years before Cora took the veil, who had been nursed by Sister Marguerite, and who, it was whispered amongst the Sisters, had died of a broken heart.

Marguerite always lingered lovingly by this grave, and this morning had fallen into a reverie, standing at the head with one hand resting on the wooden cross, round which she had twined the clinging tendrils of a vine. Her hood had fallen back, and the pure white muslin surrounding her face contrasted well with the crimson flush which stooping over the flowers in the sunshine had roused in her usually pallid cheeks. Cora was surprised by the placid beauty it imparted to the features, a beauty she had never observed before. Gazing on her spell-bound, she saw the large, sad eyes slowly fill with tears, then brim over, and the drops roll unheeded down her

cheeks, falling on her coarse black robe and on the grass at her feet like summer rain. There were no sobs, no convulsive heavings of the bosom ; nothing but tears, large tears, welling out from the bottom of a heart in which passion either of joy or sorrow had long been dead. Then her lips began to move, and Cora held her breath to listen and catch the words. 'Buried alive!' she murmured, and Cora's blood ran cold, as for a moment she put a literal construction on the expression ; but Marguerite continued, 'Yes, these were her last words—words, alas ! only too true. You *were* buried alive, Marie ! Within these prison walls your once gay young heart was crushed and broken, and the strings, stretched and tightened with suppressed feeling and smothered emotion, snapped ere they had time to harden and wither like mine ! But she is no longer buried,' she continued after a pause ; 'it is only the casket lies below ; the jewel shines above in the New Jerusalem, where her free spirit rejoices in the boundless liberty for which she pined and panted on earth.' As Marguerite spoke, she raised her eyes to heaven, and becoming suddenly conscious that she had been thinking aloud, and that she had a listener, she hurriedly pulled her hood over her face, and turned away with a scared

glance at Cora, in which shame and fear visibly mingled.

It was then that Cora eagerly whispered, 'How did you come here?'

Marguerite started as she spoke, and looked round at her with a strange, far-off look in her wet eyes, like one suddenly brought face to face with some painful, long past experience, buried but not dead, smothered but not forgotten; and as Cora heard the deep, long-drawn sigh which followed her question, and saw Marguerite press her hand on her heart as though in pain, she wished the words unspoken, and would willingly have withdrawn them. But painful as it evidently was to recall the past, it was sweet to the poor nun even to be asked a question,—a question which showed sympathy with her as a sentient being, separated as she was supposed to be by a pious fraud from the thoughts and feelings of the world she had renounced; and, conscientious as Sister Marguerite was, she yielded to the temptation, and with a stealthy glance in the direction of the convent windows—a glance begotten of years of patient endurance and obedience, which had gradually affected a nature once frank and open as the day—she stooped over the already well-trimmed border and whispered, 'I will tell

you how I came here ; but go to the other side and see if there are any weeds there.'

Cora understood, and silently obeyed ; and, both stooping at each side of the narrow grave, their heads approached as if by accident, and Marguerite could unbosom herself without rousing the suspicions of any spy who might be watching them.

If Cora expected a curious, romantic narrative, she was disappointed ; nevertheless, the few words in which Marguerite told her tale were never forgotten by her, but were ever after indelibly engraven on her memory, and inseparably associated with the scene in which they were uttered. Associated with that lovely summer morning, the very beauty of which sickened her with its dazzling sunbeams and its balmy breezes, which, coming from without, seemed (buried alive as she felt herself to be) to wither her cheek with the breath of scenes of beauty and happiness with which she had now no concern ; and shivering under the soft, sweet influences of Nature and Nature's beauties, she could have exchanged them for gloomy clouds and a sunless sky. Associated with the convent graveyard ; the singing of birds in the adjoining garden ; the lazy hum of a bee which had settled on the leaves of the vine ; and

the letters R.I.P. carved on the foot of the cross at the end of the inscription, which simply stated the name, age, and date of the death of the broken-hearted nun.

‘I came here,’ said Marguerite, ‘because I thought heaven worth any sacrifice, and that to gain it I must leave the world and deny myself all its pleasures and enjoyments, forgetting that I could not leave myself behind ; that I brought with me a warm, human heart, which would not be denied its rights, the cravings of which for love and sympathy it was impossible to stifle.’ Marguerite paused for a moment, and pressed her hand upon her heart ere she continued :

‘I was an enthusiastic, visionary girl, and I imagined that in denying the cravings of my intellect as well as of my heart, I was doing God service, and earning a heavenly reward. Left to myself, however, I am sure I would not have decided as I did ; but the enthusiasm of a highly-gifted, much-loved friend, to whom I had been betrothed from my infancy, infected me with a passion for self-sacrifice, and when he became a priest, I became a nun.’ Again Marguerite paused, and busied herself with pretended weeds. ‘If we erred, as I now believe we did,’ she continued, with quivering lips, ‘it was from the

purest of motives, but'— here the solemn tolling of the great bell of the convent made both of the nuns start to their feet, and follow each other along the narrow path with slow, measured steps and bent heads, as though occupied with solemn thoughts suitable to the approaching hour of prayer, Marguerite murmuring to herself, 'Alas, alas! deceit, deceit! born of our position; time was when I would have scorned such meanness.' And there was no humbler penitent than she in the chapel that day, for during the chanting of the Latin prayers, she was saying within herself, like the publican in the temple, 'God be merciful to me a sinner;' whilst Cora, who now never prayed at all, was sighing, 'Poor, poor Marguerite!'

The following day Cora and Louise were picking fruit in the orchard, both sad and silent. Louise looked crushed and broken-spirited, and disinclined even for a whisper, though she seldom missed such an opportunity; and Cora observed that, as she listlessly pursued her task, the tears were constantly overflowing,—not a free, refreshing shower, but drops slowly distilled, and furtively wiped away.

Coming close by chance, Cora gently touched her hand, though she did not venture to look at her, and a stifled sob showed she was understood.

‘Dear Louise,’ she whispered, in tender accents ; and the words, or rather the kind tone, overcame the proud, reticent heart, and sinking down on the grass, Louise gave way to a violent fit of weeping.

‘It’s my birthday,’ she whispered ; ‘and a letter came from my mother, but the half was torn off : something that fat fool thought I should not see. Ah me ! I can’t help myself. I’ve imagined all manner of things, good and bad, but how can I tell what was in it ? And I dare not ask,—I tried that once before, but shall not venture again. Oh, why did I come here ? oh that I could get away ! oh that I could escape !’ and she tore up the grass in handfuls in her passionate but impotent rage.

‘It must have been something about *him*,’ she continued, growing a little calmer. ‘This is the anniversary of the day we parted—my birthday. How happy I was that morning, how miserable before night ! and, after all, it was only a lover’s quarrel. It might have come all right but for my proud heart— What is it ?’ she ejaculated ; for Cora had started, and given utterance to a stifled scream.

‘Nothing,’ said Cora ; ‘only,’ she whispered, with a frightened glance at the high wall near which they were, ‘I thought I saw a man’s face

for a moment up there,—there it is again!’ she cried, letting her basket fall and scattering the fruit.

‘A man’s face!’ cried Louise, springing to her feet, and recovering all her composure in a moment.

‘Where? where? what was he like?’ she whispered.

‘Just above the old cross,’ said Cora, ignoring the second question; and fixing her eyes on the spot indicated, Louise stood motionless, with throbbing heart and quickened pulse, scarcely knowing herself what she was looking for.

But nothing appeared, and Louise again demanded what the face had been like; and on Cora declaring she did not know, and even hinting that she might have been mistaken, Louise’s choler rose.

‘You can surely tell whether he had black eyes or blue, dark hair or light?’ she cried, stamping her foot; but another scream from Cora made her look up again, and they both saw distinctly a man’s face, with the chin resting on the top of the wall above the old stone cross, which had been built into it. The next moment it had disappeared; but, ere it vanished, a small packet, tied with a string and having a stone attached to it, had fallen at Louise’s feet. To seize it and hide it was the work of a moment; and then

with flushed face and trembling hands she resumed her work.

‘I saw him,—it was he!’ she whispered, looking at Cora with an expression of happiness in her eyes which she had never seen there before, merry as Louise had often pretended to be. ‘He has come back,’ she continued, squeezing and spoiling, in her agitation, the fruit she was picking. ‘He went away, far away; he is a soldier,—he loves me still, else he never would have dared to come here. Mamma must have mentioned his name in the letter; I suspected as much. He loves me still, and he cannot have married: I heard he had.’

‘What matters it?’ said Cora, uttering the thought which had arisen in her mind at sight of the other’s joy; ‘he cannot marry a nun.’

All the happy, beaming light left Louise’s face, and an angry, reproachful glance shot from her dark eyes as Cora spoke.

‘You are right,’ she said bitterly, ‘he cannot marry a nun; but,’ she added, clasping her hands over her bosom, where the packet was hidden, ‘it is something to me to know that he loves me still. I suppose you never had a lover?’ she remarked, as she rapidly filled her basket, picking

the fruit all right with her now steady hands, anger having conquered her emotion.

‘No,’ said Cora, ‘I never had a lover’ (thinking, as she spoke, that if she had had one she would never have taken the veil). ‘Forgive me, dear Louise!’ she cried; ‘it was cruel in me, though I only spoke the truth.’

‘Forgive you!’ said Louise, every feature softening again; ‘I have nothing to forgive. Companions in misery should not take offence readily; and I am so happy, strange as it may seem to you, *mon ami* ;’ and she cast another eager glance at the top of the old cross, but, though they lingered near the spot till the allotted time for their task was past, they saw no more of the man’s head.

‘Why don’t you open it?’ asked Cora, as she followed Louise along the path.

‘Hush!’ she whispered; ‘my fingers are burning to get at it, but I would not open it till night, till I am alone in my cell. No; not for all the world. If the Mother Superior were to spy it, it would be confiscated immediately,’ and again she pressed her hand on the hidden packet.

As they went along the corridor, on their way to the kitchen with their baskets, they passed the Mother Superior’s little parlour, and seeing that the room was empty, Louise peeped in. As she

did so, a pet linnet of the Abbess', confined in a cage hanging beside the open window, enlivened by the sunshine which streamed into the room, set up a merry lay. It was a sweet song, and for a few moments the two nuns stood listening to the melody; but it irritated Louise's already excited feelings, and she shook her fist at the little warbler.

'Poor, senseless little prisoner,' she muttered, 'singing in a cage. I could wring its head off!' and depositing her basket on the floor, she advanced into the room on tiptoe, putting her finger on her lip as a warning gesture to the terrified Cora. To open the door of the cage, and retreat swiftly and noiselessly to Cora's side, was the work of a moment, then, seizing hold of her basket, she stood ready to run, breathlessly watching the result.

The bird's song suddenly ceased, and the little head was seen peeping from the open door, as though doubtful what the new state of matters might mean; but after reconnoitering, first with one eye and then with the other, it hopped back to its perch again.

Louise actually stamped her foot with vexation, whilst Cora whispered in an agony of fear, 'Oh, shut him in,—she'll be here!'

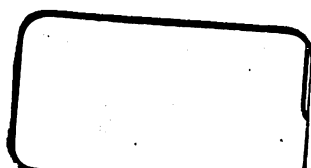
At that moment a bird, sitting on a tree outside, commenced to carol merrily; and the next, the cage was empty, the prisoner had escaped.

‘Bravo!’ muttered Louise triumphantly, with the tears standing in her eyes; but as they fled along the narrow passage, Cora heard sounds of smothered laughter, for Louise was chuckling at the idea of the Mother Superior’s chagrin at the loss of her feathered favourite. As they were disposing of the fruit, she kept up a running fire of whispers.

‘That bird shall be my omen,’ she said. ‘If it comes back to its cage, or is caught, it will be bad; if it is never more heard of, it will be good.’

‘What can she mean? She surely can’t be thinking of running away,’ thought Cora, the very possibility of such an idea sending a thrill like electricity through her frame.

‘Poor little slave!’ continued Louise, ‘it had been so long a prisoner it did not know what liberty was; and even when it got the chance, it lingered in its cell, till the voice of a friend outside brought it to its senses, broke the spell, acted like a charm, and gave it courage to spread its wings once more. And need I fear its return now? now, when it has tasted the sweets of liberty? now,



when it has recovered its birthright? No, it will never return; the omen will be good.'

'What can you mean, Louise?' whispered Cora; '*you* are not thinking of escaping!'

'Why not?' rejoined Louise; 'the sight of that face on the top of the wall has acted on me like a charm too; but it all depends on what he says here,' she added with a sigh, as she touched the concealed packet.

'But you are a nun,' said Cora hesitatingly.

'Yes, I am a nun,' said Louise, with a scornful laugh; 'but you may depend upon it, no pious scruples on that score will detain me here against my will. Yes, I am the bride of heaven; I have taken the veil; I have'—

'Hush, oh hush!' cried Cora; 'you are speaking too loud; you may be overheard, and then'—

'Ay, and then,' said Louise gloomily, and again sinking her voice to a whisper, 'then all hope of freedom would be gone, bolts and bars—and—but I will be silent and prudent; I will take the hint, dear Cora,' and she immediately relapsed into unbroken silence, though, when an opportunity occurred, she cast on Cora glances full of meaning, which she was not slow to interpret: they spoke of new hopes, of revived motives, of the prospect of freedom; of the strength

of a determined purpose to escape from a living tomb; the past almost already blotted out; the future, uncertain as it was, looked forward to with impatience. Yes; Louise was no longer a nun; she had again become a woman, with all a woman's hopes and fears.





CHAPTER II.

MARGUERITE'S STORY.

‘What is all righteousness that men devise ?
What—but a sordid bargain for the skies ?’

CORA saw little of Louise during the few following weeks, for Sister Marguerite was seized with sudden illness, and the office of nursing her was deputed to Cora, who, however, received several secret hints, that though the Mother Superior openly accused no one of being accessory to the escape of her favourite, she had evidently fixed upon the real culprit, and was subjecting Louise to all the petty annoyances and small insults which suggest themselves to mean, unprincipled minds unfortunately possessed of power over their fellow-creatures.

‘She is only waiting her time,—playing with me like a cat with a mouse,’ whispered Louise on one of the few occasions on which she got a

chance to speak to Cora ; ' but the bird has not returned, the prisoner has not been recaptured ; the omen is good, and I can bear it all without a murmur.'

She said no more, for Louise had suddenly become prudent, and she knew that a rash word was perhaps as much as her life was worth ; for liberty had become life to her, imprisonment death : she was plotting and planning, and a rash word overheard might undo all.

But the time came when she was obliged to take Cora to a certain extent into her confidence, for she was too generous to wish to escape alone ; and telling her she was making preparations for flight, she anxiously entreated her to risk all and accompany her.

' *He* has plotted, and I have planned,' she said, ' and it now rests with me to give the word. Dear Cora, do not hesitate ; it is worth the risk. We will take you with us to a land where, *he* says, if they dare to attempt to kidnap us, one cry for help will rally round us a host of brave hearts and strong arms, ready and willing to succour and defend us. Come, dear Cora,' and Louise twined her arms round her, and kissed her fondly in the dark, for it was a midnight stolen interview. For a moment Cora hesitated, her heart throbbing

wildly at the prospect of liberty ; but it was only for a moment, for she too was generous, and to leave Marguerite, whom she now loved more than ever—Marguerite, who, she feared, would never recover, who was so patient and uncomplaining, so grateful for the smallest kindness—was, she felt, impossible.

‘ You are very kind, dear Louise ; but I cannot leave Marguerite,’ she whispered with a sigh.

‘ Cannot leave Marguerite ! ’ ejaculated Louise. ‘ What is the short time you may be with her compared to being buried alive for the remainder of your life ? Marguerite will get another nurse after you are gone. Cora ! Cora ! you may never get another chance—you have not got a lover like me ; ’ and Louise sighed too, but hers was a happy sigh, and there was a touch of triumph in her tone which jarred on Cora’s nerves, rendered doubly sensitive by the strain put upon them.

‘ No,’ she said coldly, ‘ I have no lover to help me to escape ; but I love Marguerite, and cannot leave her.’

Louise stamped her foot and almost cried with vexation.

‘ I have risked much to give you the chance ; you’ll repent it after I am gone,’ she said ; and then, changing her tone, she coaxed and expostu-

lated and remonstrated till further colloquy was dangerous, and they parted, Louise wounded and disappointed, Cora grieved and sorrowful.

She saw no more of Louise, and started at every unusual sound, frightened lest the fugitive might be caught in the very act of escaping, or be pursued and brought back.

Sitting one morning half asleep, just as daylight was dimly dawning, and making visible the few articles of furniture in Marguerite's bare, comfortless cell, she became aware of a soft scratching on the other side of the door, close beside which she was sitting; and starting to her feet, she opened it with the soft, noiseless motion which had become habitual to her.

At the back of it stood a lady dressed in the height of the fashion of the period, a rich lace veil covering and concealing her face, whilst a large shawl was thrown gracefully over her arm. At sight of her, Cora stood transfixed with amazement; but the veil was thrown back, and she saw before her Louise, Sister Louise, no longer pale as death, but with eyes full of delight and a smile of triumph on her lips. She said not one word, but lifting her hand made a warning gesture, understood amongst the nuns as a mark of silence, and then, throwing her arms round Cora's neck,

she kissed her repeatedly ere she fled along the narrow passage, looking back as she turned the corner to wave a last farewell.

Poor Cora! never till that moment did she realize the extent of the sacrifice she had made, and her first impulse was a wild thought of risking all, leaving Marguerite, running after Louise, and escaping too. But it was only for a moment; and she returned to the cell, thankful that she had checked an impulse which might have betrayed Louise and marred her escape, and with contrite feelings toward the poor invalid, whose uneasy slumbers had fortunately been undisturbed.

For days afterwards, Cora held her breath and listened; but Marguerite's illness had reached its height, and, closely confined to the cell, she heard nothing for a time. Supposed to be absorbed in nursing, she escaped the ordeal through which each inmate of the convent was put when Louise's flight was discovered; and Marguerite's death being daily expected, her nurse was left unquestioned and unsuspected.

But Marguerite partially recovered, and lingered on week after week; and during these last weeks of her life, she and Cora opened their hearts to each other—only at intervals and stealthily, it is true, but with full confidence on both sides.

When Marguerite heard of Louise's escape, and saw that, but for her, Cora would have fled too, her grief was great, and Cora experienced a feeling of mortification at seeing, as she thought, her sacrifice unappreciated. But it was not so. Marguerite was truly grateful ; but though she never would have dreamt of escaping herself, the thought that she had been the innocent means of detaining an unwilling captive within the convent walls was anguish to her affectionate heart, and from that moment to effect Cora's escape became the ruling idea of her mind.

'Not before I die,' she would whisper, tenderly pressing Cora's hand, anxious that she should understand, that to have her with her during the remainder of her life was indeed a precious consolation.

Often did Cora know she was pondering over the chances of her escape ; and seeing that Marguerite not only thought it possible, but not unlawful, she began to entertain a hope that in some way or other it might be effected—a hope, faint, very faint, at first, but which gradually strengthened till it became tacitly understood between them.

It was during this time that Marguerite told in fragmentary snatches the story of her early life,

a story remembered by Cora in after years as a connected whole.

‘I was brought up,’ she said, ‘in the ancient city of Bourges, a city full of priests and scholars, the very atmosphere of which is redolent of piety and learning. We lived in an old château, Hubert and I, Louis and Marie; Hubert was my only brother, and Louis and Marie were our cousins. We were all orphans, and had been betrothed from our infancy, Louis to me, Marie to Hubert—an arrangement which promised a happy future, for, as we grew up, our hearts confirmed what had been fixed upon by our parents and guardians ere we ourselves had either wish or will in the matter. Louis and I were possessed of similar tastes and inclinations; we were grave, serious, and thoughtful, fond of study and meditation—the air of Bourges seeming to have inspired us both not only with a love of learning, but with deep and sincere sentiments of piety. Whilst, on the contrary, Hubert and Marie were gay and thoughtless, laughing and singing from morning to night, light-hearted and happy, living in the present, even as Louis and I were prone to live in the future, often more impressed by things unseen and eternal than things seen and temporal. But though thus differently constituted, we all

loved each other dearly, and were indeed a happy family. Hubert was a dear, affectionate, generous boy; so generous that our old servant Pierre used to say it was a good thing his ears were attached to his head, else he would have been sure to have given them away to somebody who needed them. He was about two years younger than Louis and I, but early assumed the office of champion in any childish quarrel with our playfellows of the neighbouring châteaux, laughingly declaring that Louis was nothing but a dreamer, and only fit for a priest. Louis quietly allowed him to fight our battles and maintain our rights, always interfering, however, when diplomacy became necessary, and then he proved a powerful ally.

‘But though Hubert seemed to us a merry, thoughtless fellow, who was incapable of entering into or appreciating our feelings, there was within him a deep under-current, which needed only circumstance and opportunity to develop itself; and when the time came, the stream welled forth pure and strong. True, he might not have our fine, metaphysical ideas, our dreamy, pietistic notions; but he had the spirit of a martyr, the heart of a hero, and when he was tried he was not found wanting. And he was tried, sorely tried; for, Cora, he became a Protestant!’

As Marguerite uttered the last word, her voice sank to a whisper, and in the same low tone Cora ejaculated, 'A Protestant!'

'Yes,' whispered Marguerite, 'Hubert became a Protestant; and no one who knew him doubted that the change was the result of deep, conscientious conviction, and from no mere caprice or love of novelty. He had everything to gain by remaining a Catholic, but lost everything by becoming a Protestant; and dreadful as I once thought it to have a heretic brother, my respect for him was increased rather than lessened by his adherence to what he believed was the path of duty. And though I still cling to the Church of my fathers, I have learned to regard those who differ from it with that charity which should pervade all those who have the same faith and hope. Cora, I have learned much since I came here, and I sometimes think that it has been better for me, and for others too, that I did retire from the world; for many a weary pillow I have watched by, and many a weary soul have I cheered and comforted with the words of eternal life; for, pious as I thought myself in the dear old château in Bourges, it was here that I first learned the true foundation of all piety. It was here that in secret I read a Bible which my poor

Marie had managed to secrete. It was Hubert's gift, and she valued and treasured it on that account, and on that account only; for its contents were regarded by her with mysterious fear, from having, she knew, been the means of his change of faith—a change which had not only separated her from her lover in this world, and driven her to take refuge in a convent, but which had, she believed, separated them for ever; for she had been taught that there was no salvation for heretics, no hope for any beyond the pale of the Church. My poor dear Marie! it almost broke my heart to see her pining away, her lively spirit broken by the very hopelessness of her situation; and to know that my own brother had been the cause did not lessen my grief. But death released her, and hers was a happy death-bed. She had none of the self-righteous difficulties which for a time oppressed and darkened my spirit, but thankfully accepted the offered cure for all her woes, gratefully rejoicing in the light which, though it had come too late for this world, not only shed a bright halo over that to which she was hastening, but took from death its sting and fear, and gave her the hope of meeting her lover in heaven. You must not suppose,' continued Marguerite, wiping her eyes, after a

pause, 'that though I say Hubert was the cause of poor Marie's immolation, that he was to blame. No, he would never of his own accord have broken off the match; but she was under the power of the priests, and her guardians too were not slow to represent to her in awful terms the guilt and danger she would incur in wedding a heretic; and her brother, he too— But I am not going to say anything against Louis,' said Marguerite, after hesitating for a moment or two. 'Whatever he did was from conscience, and he should not be judged harshly: let me rather tell you of Hubert, and how he became a Protestant.

'Our old servant, Pierre, was a descendant of one of the Huguenots who at one time took possession of Bourges, and Hubert was never weary listening to the old man's tales of the bravery and courage of these men, who suffered and still suffer with a faith and patience which must call forth even the admiration of their bitterest enemies. But though we knew that Hubert liked Pierre's company, we had no idea of the strong hold his talk had taken of the boy's mind. Well do I remember the day when it first dawned on me that some change was coming over my merry, thoughtless brother. It was Christmas time, and all the young people of Bourges were busily engaged in

decking out the various churches for the coming festival, and we four were amongst those who had divided the task of decorating our magnificent cathedral. We had either been lazier than the others, or had undertaken a larger portion of the work, for group after group finished their tasks, and we were left alone to finish ours.

"Where's Hubert?" cried Louis, as he twisted and untwisted a beautiful wreath of costly flowers which had been brought from our own conservatory. "I'm just spoiling this, and he has more skill and taste in his little finger than I have I believe in my whole body;" and he called out "Hubert! Hubert!" but no Hubert responded to the cry, and Marie, declaring he must have fallen asleep, volunteered to go in search of him. She returned in a few minutes with him, laughingly informing us she had found him leaning against a pillar, in a brown study, sleeping, she averred, with his eyes open.

"Look here, Hubert," cried Louis, holding up his half-finished wreath; and Hubert took it in hand. But though he finished it with his usual skill, I knew from his listless manner that the work had lost all interest for him.

Our tasks finished, we prepared to return home. It was late in the afternoon, and the dim religious light of the cathedral helped the gather-

ing twilight; but this only increased the beauty of the scene, and we stood for some minutes at the door looking back ere we left. Louis and I gazed in silence, but Marie was voluble in her exclamations of admiration and pleasure. It was she who had made the wreaths for the images and pictures, and she repeatedly called Hubert's attention to the beauty of her handiwork. His only reply was a smile, a sad smile.

"Hubert, what is the matter with you?" I cried, surprised and alarmed.

"Nothing, my dear sister," he said kindly; adding gravely, and with an evident effort, "I have been thinking of Him whom we profess to worship as equal with Jehovah, and yet whose birth we commemorate in this childish manner. Oh, if I knew Him to be *my* Saviour, *my* God, how differently would I serve Him! how differently would I honour Him! Nothing would be too much; it would be the sacrifice of a lifetime, the consecration of my whole being. Looking down now from the throne of His glory, how must He despise all this flummery"— He paused abruptly, for we were all staring at him, and turning hastily away, muttered something about having "forgotten himself."

'It was years after this before Hubert declared

himself a Protestant ; but I always look back on that day as the beginning of all our sorrows. Before his ultimate decision I had left the world and come here, refusing alike to listen to his arguments and brotherly entreaties,—wrapped in a mantle of spiritual pride of my own weaving. But before my poor Marie followed me to the convent, the veil had fallen from my eyes, and I would, if I could, have saved her from the fate of a nun. I was so placed that this was impossible ; but I have no scruples in trying to deliver *you*, Cora. I see things clearer now, and look upon assisting you to escape in the same light as delivering a slave, or an imprisoned bird or squirrel.’

‘But what became of Hubert ?’ asked Cora.

‘He suffered much in adhering to the course dictated by his conscience,’ said Marguerite. ‘He not only lost his bride, but all his worldly possessions, and is now earning his daily bread in a shop in Paris ; but I know that never for a moment has he regretted the choice he made. And, Cora, though Louis and I looked down from the heights of our spiritual infatuation upon him and Marie, I know now that they were both nearer the kingdom of heaven than we, who laboured so hard to attain to it ; and though Louis thought he was

sacrificing much, it was Hubert who was the true martyr. Louis is in the sphere most agreeable to him; and he will need all the self-denying principles of his theory to counteract the effect of the adulation which, as a preacher, follows him wherever he goes.'

But Cora cared more to hear about Hubert than Louis. The picture of the bright merry boy had made a deep impression on her mind, and whatever Marguerite let fall about him was eagerly remembered and cherished, and he became a hero in her eyes. Not that Cora had any sympathy with his religious peculiarities; it was the results and not the motives which attracted her, and whatever had been the moving cause, her admiration would have been the same. Sitting by Marguerite's bedside, she would close her eyes and raise pictures before her mental vision, in which Hubert played the conspicuous part. She saw him a bright, beautiful boy, fighting his companions' battles in the gardens of the old family château at Bourges, and rejoiced in the victories which she always accorded to him. She saw him grave and thoughtful in the old cathedral, uttering his indignant protest against frivolity in the name of religion; and she tried to imagine her hero as he was now patiently labouring at some uncon-

genial work, grave and sad, perhaps, but courageous still.

Whilst Cora was thus nursing her hero-worship, the dying Marguerite, composed and resigned in all that appertained to herself, was anxiously deliberating on the best means for her escape from the convent. By slow and painful efforts she wrote a letter to her old lover, which she warned Cora to secrete and preserve with the utmost care.

'Louis will help you for my sake,' she said; 'he is powerful, and is too noble to betray you. Tell him'— But Marguerite was very weak, and paused, overcome with emotion, and though she gave Cora advice as to the best means of effecting her escape, she said little more, save what was absolutely necessary.

At intervals she communicated to her the fact that the porteress was a sister of their old servant, Pierre, a woman who had followed her to the convent for no other reason than to be near her. Some kindly service, some affectionate act, too openly displayed, had roused the angry suspicions of the Mother Superior, jealous as she was bound to be of any infringement of the discipline of the convent; and, the punishment falling upon poor Suzette, Marguerite had anxiously avoided all

intercourse with her, and had expressly forbidden any approach to intimacy, a prohibition which was broken by both every favourable opportunity which occurred. But during her illness, Suzette had been watched and guarded. Both she and Marguerite were suspected of Protestant tendencies, and to keep them separate was considered indispensably necessary. But Marguerite declared with tears that she must see her old friend before she died, and that it was on her she chiefly relied to assist Cora to escape.

The next few weeks were always remembered by Cora as a feverish dream. A midnight interview between the porteress and Marguerite, during which, notwithstanding their grief at parting, the chances of her escape were discussed and planned, Marguerite proposing that Suzette herself should seize the opportunity, now that all motive for remaining in the convent would be over,—a proposal spurned by the apparently petrified but still warm-hearted woman, who declared that, Marguerite dead, her only hope in life would be to sleep beside her in death; then Marguerite's death, and all the attendant circumstances of rite and ceremonial, followed by a feeling of helpless isolation, which made escape seem to Cora a despairing, forlorn hope; then a reaction, which

roused her to hope and activity once more, and which ended in finding herself one morning outside the convent walls, fleeing as for life, her convent dress hidden by a large cloak procured for her, she knew not how, by Suzette, who had also provided her with a small sum of money. Home was her first thought, for surely her mother would not hesitate to receive and welcome her, and keep her arrival a secret till she had found a secure place in which to hide. And home she went, strangely awkward in her recovered freedom ; starting at every new object she met by the way, more especially when she saw a form approaching which bore any resemblance to that of a priest. Many times she deviated from the road, hiding behind trees and hedges, often when there was no real cause of alarm ; and the shades of evening were closing around her ere she reached, with throbbing heart, the gate which was built into one end of the high wall which surrounded her mother's house. Before it she paused to take breath, the sight of the windows of the house as she peeped in bringing tears to her eyes, which prevented her seeing any form which might be fitting past them. Standing thus, in the act of raising her hand to take hold of the rope which was attached to the large house-bell, she was startled by the sound of

a coming footstep; and drawing back into the shadow round the corner, she saw, with a terror which blanched her face and took the power either to move or flee from her limbs, the well-remembered figure of the family confessor; and with all the self-consciousness of one who had so much at stake, she never doubted but that he had heard of her escape, and had come to inform her mother of it. But though she saw him, he did not see her; and after a strong pull at the bell, he fortunately turned round the other way, as he waited for admittance.

Ah, that bell! how the sound of it went to Cora's heart, bringing back, with painful echoes, the familiar memories of her childhood; for bells are like human faces and human voices, no two are alike; and as Cora heard it, the first time since she had left her home to return no more, a host of incidents connected with its tones rose up before her with every toll.

But the gate opened, and the priest turned round again and stalked in; and as Cora caught a full view of the profile of his face, her eyes were suddenly opened to the fact that the sharp, aquiline nose, the deep-set, mysterious eyes, and the cruel mouth had had more to do with her entering the convent than she had ever before suspected. Yes;

the web had been skilfully woven round her, the victim had been blinded with consummate art, and the sacrifice had appeared so voluntary, even to herself, as to disarm all suspicion of persuasion, far less of coercion. And now here was this man, arrived before her, still the director of her mother's and sister's consciences, still the censor and judge of their every action; and how would she, the poor fugitive, be received in the circumstances? Alas! Cora scarcely took time to answer the question, but turned away, sick and giddy, to seek protection and shelter elsewhere.





CHAPTER III.

THE PRIEST AND PREACHER.

'The plea of works, as arrogant and vain,
Heav'n turns from with abhorrence and disdain.'

IN a large but somewhat low-roofed chamber, at the top of a house in one of the faubourgs of Paris, a priest was sitting absorbed in meditation. Leaning back in his chair, he seemed oppressed with his thoughts, for his brows were knitted and his lips compressed as with pain,—as though the very act of thinking had become a weary obligation, which had strained his mental powers, till the strings of the machine were so strained and rendered so sensitive as to destroy the very end he had in view. In a corner of the room, a surplice lay on a *prie-dieu*, whilst on the wall directly opposite where the priest was sitting, the curtain had been drawn back from before a painting of the crucifixion,

hung above an altar with a crucifix draped in black; for the day was Good Friday, on which all good Catholics are supposed to be in a state of mourning. The priest was in the prime of life, and no one could look at him without being impressed by the peculiarly intellectual expression of his countenance, which, at the same time, bore marks of the gracious benevolence of his character and disposition. Suddenly, as though struck with some bright new idea, he pushed back his chair, started to his feet, and striding with eager footsteps across the floor, he opened the door of a small cupboard, and having taken from it a violin and its bow, he played (after a few preliminary scrapes and flourishes) a merry dance tune, to which he capered about with right good-will. Thus occupied, he did not hear slow, heavy footsteps ascending the wooden staircase, but paused abruptly as an old man carrying a large black bag entered the apartment, and stood at the door, rooted to the spot, staring at the dancing ecclesiastic with open-eyed, open-mouthed amazement, if not horror.

‘My good friend,’ said the priest, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and a smile of comic amusement playing on his lips, ‘I see you are somewhat surprised to see me thus; but in study-

ing my discourse, I found myself in too low spirits to do my subject justice in the delivery, and have been trying the effect of a lively measure and a little exercise. I am happy to say that the remedy has been successful, and that I am now ready to accompany you ;' and replacing the violin in its place in the cupboard, he prepared to set out with the attendant, whose duty it was to carry his vestments to church, and render him any necessary service, and who, as he carefully folded the surplice, cast occasional wondering glances at the priest, as though doubting whether Father Louis and his senses had not, for the time being, parted company.*

Ready to depart, he left the room, followed by his still wondering attendant, but had only descended a few steps, when a female form, enveloped in a cloak, rushed up and fell at his feet, ejaculating in pitiful accents of agonized entreaty, 'Save me, father, save me !'

Obeying the first impulse of a noble heart, the priest raised her in his arms, as he would have done some poor wounded bird or panting, pursued leveret; and springing up the steps, he carried her into his chamber, taking the precaution

* This anecdote is related of Bourdaloue, the celebrated French preacher.

to lock the door and keep out the pursuers he imagined were in full cry at her heels, and leaving the old church officer more surprised and panic-stricken than ever. There, to his dismay, he found that she had fainted; and when roused by the plentiful supply of cold water which he poured upon her face, Cora (for it was she) saw, from the terror which mingled with the compassion expressed in his eyes, that he had thought her dead or dying.

‘My poor child,’ he said with a sigh of relief, ‘have no fear; whatever may have been your crime, rest assured that I will not deliver you up. You are as safe with me as in the sanctuary of the altar.’

Poor Cora! she had never dreamt of being suspected of being a guilty culprit fleeing from justice. It was the last drop in her already overflowing cup; but the torrent of tears which the priest’s words called forth relieved at once her burning brain and bursting heart. She forgot that the generous chivalry of the man, which made it a point of honour not to betray the woman who evidently reposed implicit trust in him, might give way before the sacred duty of the priest, when he heard she was a nun, who had broken her irrevocable vows, and been guilty of a

heinous crime against that Church the interests of which he was bound to defend even to the last drop of his blood, and that the more conscientious and trustworthy he was, the more anxious would he be to deliver her up to justice; and, again falling at his feet, she declared, as well as her sobs and tears permitted, that she was no guilty thief or murderer, but a poor innocent nun, who had fled from her convent, and come to him for succour and protection, thereby placing him in a predicament more awkward than he had ever experienced before. Gently raising the poor girl, he placed her on the *fauteuil*, in which he had been reclining whilst studying his discourse, and with a darkened brow began to pace the chamber from end to end, with hasty, impatient footsteps.

‘How came you to me?’ he asked sternly, as he suddenly paused opposite the worn-out, trembling girl.

Then Cora drew from her bosom the carefully-cherished letter of Sister Marguerite, which in her agitation she had for a time forgotten, and silently placed it in his hands. He took it somewhat impatiently, but at sight of the handwriting he became deadly pale, and as he read the opening sentences, the letter fell from his hands

and he sank into a chair. For a few moments there was a dead silence, and Cora, stealing a scared glance at him, saw him clasping his hands and raising his eyes to heaven, whilst his lips trembled with unspoken words of prayer. But accustomed to conquer emotion and to stifle feeling, he speedily regained his composure, and lifting poor Marguerite's blurred and blotted pages, he read and re-read them with eager interest. The letter was as follows:—

‘DEAR LOUIS,—Ere this reaches you, the birds will be singing above my head in the convent graveyard, but I shall not hear them; and the convent bell will toll wearily as of old, but it shall no longer annoy me; for I shall be safe, where the weary are at rest, in that New Jerusalem which you and I, two romantic, visionary children, used to dream and talk so much about,—making airy, fancy pictures, coloured by our own childish, glowing imaginations,—and to obtain an entrance into which, we two, scarce yet grown man and woman, parted for ever—you to become a priest, and I a nun. It sends a pang through my heart still, Louis, to remember that parting; and I am foolish enough to hope that you may remember its agony too. Ah, Louis! what a mistake we made in the pride of our hearts, thinking we were doing God

service by the very pain we suffered! What an insult from the creature to the Creator! Dear Louis, I have much to say, but have neither strength nor opportunity to say it, and must hasten on. I have learned here that the salvation for which we in all sincerity resolved to work and fight with self-denying zeal, and to gain which we gave up the world and the world's joys, is not a reward either of holy living or self-sacrificing deeds, but the gift of the God of love. I am convinced that you too, Louis, have attained to the same precious faith which now sustains me in the near prospect of death; that you are one of those who worship God in the spirit, rejoice in Jesus Christ, and have no confidence in the flesh; and that, though through a mistaken piety we have been separated in this world, we shall meet above, where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Forgive me, Louis; I had no thought when I began to write of opening up the old wound, but the very fact that I was again speaking to you has led me on thus far.

'If this letter ever reaches you, it will be brought by a young girl whom I am anxious to save from my fate. Let no conscientious scruple deter you from befriending her. Even suppose a monastic

life right and proper (which now, lying on my death-bed, I declare to be a delusion and a snare of Satan himself), *she* has no vocation for it—far less, Louis, than I had, who have never ceased to regret the step I took. And, Louis, if my example have no influence upon you, let the voice of our poor broken-hearted Marie cry aloud from her grave to save another from the consequences of a like mistake. When, in the agony of her heart at the separation from her lover, she came to you as a brother and a priest, saying she was sick of the world, instead of giving her time to recover from the blow, you, actuated, I have no doubt, by conscientious motives and a real desire for her spiritual good, encouraged and nursed her half-formed intention of taking the veil; and before the reaction of her grief had come, she was immured in a convent for life, and her splendid dowry was in the coffers of the Church. Ah, Louis! you did not know it perhaps, but pride in the sacrifice of a sister might have a share in the motives which actuated you. But I am wandering again, and again you must forgive me; one gets wonderfully clear-eyed and plain-spoken when earth is behind and eternity so near. I charge you, Louis, save this girl; deliver her not up to the priests; send her not back to her

motioning the old man to precede him, he locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and slowly descended the stairs. Instead of feeling alarmed by this proceeding, Cora heard the key turn in the lock with a sigh of relief; she had implicit confidence in the priest, a confidence derived from Marguerite; and the fact that he had made a prisoner of her gave her a feeling of safety and security. Now that she felt safer than she had done since she left the convent, her wearied body asserted its claims, and she gladly availed herself of the priest's hospitality; and finding, as he had said, a repast ready, she ate like a hungry child, and then throwing herself on a couch, she rested her cheek on her hand and fell sound asleep. Whilst Cora slept, Father Louis preached, and, eloquent as he always was, he was that day pronounced by general consent to have surpassed himself. Though his text was taken from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, his real text was Marguerite's letter, and the sermon was a passionate outburst of inner feeling. He preached like a man possessed, though he felt like one in a dream, or like one suddenly roused from slumber. Old memories crowded thick upon him: the gentle, beautiful girl with whom he had been on terms of endearing intimacy from his very infancy, and

whom he had never seen since when, in the spirit of pseudo-martyrdom, he had been present at what he considered her heavenly betrothal, seemed suddenly to have started up before him, with the sad, imploring eyes with which she had been wont to regard him when first he hinted his wish to become a priest. For though Marguerite had, with the reticence of a noble, generous nature, spoken of the sacrifice as mutual, he knew that, but for him, she never would have taken the veil; and recalled with a bitter pang the half condemnatory, half triumphant feelings which had possessed him when he discovered how much it cost her to relinquish him. Thus roused, he forgot the Catholic in the Christian, the priest in the man, and preached Justification by Faith as clearly as the Apostle Paul himself, earnestly entreating his hearers to put no confidence in any good works or sacrifice of their own, but to put all their trust in the one great Sacrifice, and in that alone.

But, his sermon finished, the excitement over, a reaction set in, and Father Louis left the church with a bowed down, humbled head, and with his hat slouched over his downcast eyes. He turned away in the opposite direction from that in which he had come, and made his way towards the other end of Paris by a circuitous, roundabout route.

He might have been anxious to escape observation, or it might be simply the Jesuit education, which made it an unconscious habit with him never to take a straight path where a crooked one could be found; either way, he took the long road and avoided the short one.





CHAPTER IV.

THE MERCHANT.

' If done beneath Thy laws,
Even servile labour shines ;
Hallow'd is toil, if this the cause,
The meanest work divine.'

HIS destination was a small shop in an obscure faubourg, and as he approached the door he hesitated and lingered, and drew his hat still farther over his brow, and wrapped his cloak still closer round him. At length he summoned up courage, and with hasty steps entered the shop, pausing for a moment on the threshold to cast a hasty glance round the interior, till it rested on the face of a man, evidently the master of the shop, who was busily engaged adding up a long row of figures, and who, as the priest advanced and stood before him, said, without looking up, ' Pardon, one moment.'

He was an erect, wiry figure, rather below than

above the middle size, with a fine, expressive countenance, the marked features of which were a Roman nose and eagle eyes, their sharp expression being tempered and softened by the almost womanly tenderness and sweetness of the small mouth and chin. He was clad in a complete suit of fine grey cloth, having on the right sleeve a broad band of black crape, on which was embroidered in white silk, 'A MEMOIRE M. A.'

'Now, sir,' he said, as he finished his task and laid down his pen, turning respectfully towards his supposed customer with a pleasant smile on his lips,—a smile which roused mingled sensations in the heart of Father Louis, recalling, as it did, the memory of another face, very similar to the one before him in expression if not in features.

But, instead of giving an order, the priest removed his hat, and, with a melancholy smile, held out his hand. For a moment the merchant seemed petrified with astonishment; then his eyes brightened and sparkled, and seizing the offered hand he shook it repeatedly, crying in eager, excited tones, 'It's Louis!' adding, 'I was there! I was there!'

'Where?' asked the priest, equally surprised in turn, but making considerably less outward show of his astonishment.

‘In the church!’ cried the other. ‘I have just come from it; yes, I was there! I heard your sermon, Louis; it was magnificent, charming, superb! How the old walls rung with the old gospel!—and it was a Catholic priest who preached, a Jesuit! Bah! the more shame to him,’ he cried, his mood suddenly changing as he threw away the hand he held, a contemptuous, withering sneer on his lips and an indignant glance in his eyes. ‘What right had you to preach justification by faith, you who teach, or should teach, the very opposite doctrine? How can you remain a priest? a Jesuit? Have you any conscience left, Louis?’

‘Had you preached that sermon in other circumstances,’ he continued, without waiting for a reply, and pacing the narrow limits of his shop with quick, impatient footsteps, ‘it might, nay, it must have done good; but the gay butterfly ladies and the fine perfumed gentlemen who listened to you so attentively, who wiped their eyes when you finished, and whispered to each other that Father Louis had surpassed himself to-day, and that it had been better than a play,—would they not, think you, nurtured as they have been, apply justification by faith in their own way, and retire from the church resolved to continue in sin that grace might abound?’

You will be a more charming man than ever with them all, Louis.'

The brow of the preacher darkened as the merchant spoke, but self-command was habitual with him, and, besides, the man before him was perhaps the last in the world with whom at that moment he felt inclined to quarrel; and conquering his rising choler, he said quietly, 'You do both me and them injustice, Hubert; but we will allow that to pass for the present, along with your defective logic,' adding, almost in a whisper, as he put his finger on the band of embroidered crape which ornamented the other's arm, 'You mourn after a fashion of your own, Hubert. You did not tell me that your sister was dead.'

'Tell *you*!' he cried, with renewed vehemence, 'tell you! You who left the world behind you, with all its joys and sorrows, its affections and feelings! What right had *you* to expect to be informed of the death of one who died to you many years ago,—you who—bah!' he said, turning on his heel as though in contempt, but in reality to hide his feelings and conquer his emotion.

Again had the priest's brow darkened, and he was about to reply when the other turned round and prevented him.

‘As for my mourning,’ he said, in a tone of affected carelessness, ‘I despise the fashion of showing my grief by the colour and style of my garments. Such outward display is a mockery of the genuine grief of the heart, and I am happy to say that I am possessed of enough of moral courage to enable me to refuse to follow the barbarous custom,—a cruel custom for the poor, who, afraid to ignore the senseless fashion, sometimes endure both cold and hunger rather than seem to be deficient in the feelings supposed to be represented by those outward trappings of woe.’

‘What means this, then?’ asked the priest, again touching the crape band, with the shadow of a smile on his lips.

‘It means,’ said the merchant with an angry blush, called to his cheek by the Jesuit’s smile,—‘it means that I wish others to know that I *have* lost a friend, though I disapprove of the usual method of announcing it. I have no wish to hide my grief, and it is necessary to have some mark outwardly, to prevent being sickened by the mirth of those who in all innocence would thus hurt your feelings, if they had no idea you were a mourner. Ay, you may smile, Louis’—

‘Hush, Hubert! look here,’ interrupted the

priest in a gentle tone, as he took Marguerite's letter from his bosom and held it out to him. He took it with a half-reluctant, suspicious gesture, but at the sight of the handwriting the expression of his face suddenly changed, his eyes became soft and humid, and the corners of his mouth twitched and quivered; and as he eagerly read and re-read the contents, a bright light seemed to shine from every feature, and large tears, evidently of joy, rolled down his cheeks.

'Blessed be God! she died in the Faith,' he cried, clasping his hands in an ecstasy of gratitude. 'Dear, dear Louis, forgive me. If I had known what you were so kindly bringing to me, I would not have spoken as I did. You have taken a load off my mind,' and with all the ardour of a Frenchman, he clasped the priest in his arms, kissing and hugging him in a most loving manner.

'And my poor Marie, too,' he said, in a soft whisper, 'she, too, awaits me above. See, Louis,' he added, lifting the crape, and showing another band below it, embroidered in a similar manner, the initials being M. B. 'This I wore till Marguerite died. It's wonderful, in this world, how one sorrow wipes out another sometimes, but it has not been so with me. Marie and Marguerite

have ever been both here,' and he placed his hand on his heart, 'and when I placed the second mourning badge on my arm, I would not displace the first; and now they are both waiting me there,' he added, looking up to heaven with a face which Father Louis, looking on, thought must be like the face of an angel.

'You are well named ANGE, Hubert,' he said; 'both you and Marguerite,' he added in a low tone. 'But I do not deserve your thanks; a selfish motive brought me here. I came for help.'

'You were always conscientious to a fault, and how your conscience keeps a straight line, now that it inhabits a Jesuit's body, is more than I can comprehend,' said Hubert, his mood changing once more, a mischievous smile on his lips and a sparkle in his eyes. 'But what can an obscure individual like me do to help the man on whose lips the *élite* of Paris hung entranced this morning; but you preached well, Louis, and, after all, what did it matter that it was in a Romish church and to Roman Catholics you preached? You belong to the Church universal, the one grand brotherhood of Christ, which knows no name, no sect, no bond, save the invisible tie which binds each member to Him, whom not having seen we love.'

'I belong to the one true CHURCH,' interrupted the priest hastily, 'the Church of the apostles, and'—

'Yes, yes, of course,' cried the other, interrupting him in turn; 'we know all about that, Louis; you and I agreed long ago to differ on that point. Seeing we each consider the other a true Christian, it matters little in comparison that one calls himself Catholic and the other Protestant; you need not revive the old question, "Where was your Church before Luther?" for I have no other answer to give than the old answer, My Church was to be found *then* where yours is not to be found now, in the Word of God.'

'But, Hubert,' cried the priest.

'I want none of your fine twisted arguments,' he said, again interrupting him, 'keep them for the Jesuit College; you'll need them all to fight with Pascal. It will be long, Louis, till he find a flaw in you, either in character or argument; but you are both inconsistent, seeing the light, and walking in the dark traditions of men. Why, man, you are far more guilty than the poor ignorant Catholics whom you lead and govern; they have at least the merit of consistency. Their's may be called the sin of ignorance—wilful, it may be; but you and Pascal have the light, and— But why need I vex

myself,' he muttered, turning on his heel, 'why need the poor persecuted Protestant trouble himself about the men whose praise is in every man's mouth; one of whom preached this day before the king himself, reasoning of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come even like Paul himself? But you want Paul's bonds, Louis, you want the bonds.'

'I thought we had agreed to differ,' said Father Louis, determined not to be led into an argument. 'I came to you for help, Hubert. What am I to do with this poor girl?' he added, lifting Marguerite's letter from the floor.

'The escaped nun?' said Hubert. 'What can you do with her but send her back to her prison, there to be dealt with as the Church directs? The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel, Louis.'

He seemed to take a strange delight in tormenting the priest, and as he spoke, eagerly watched the changes which flitted over his expressive countenance. But Father Louis scarcely heard him; he was again reading Marguerite's letter, and his face was a faithful index of the feelings which it roused within him.

'More of the man than the Jesuit yet,' Hubert muttered to himself, as he saw him endeavouring in vain to stifle his emotion.

‘If I find what Marguerite says is true,’ he said, in a low, hesitating, choked tone, ‘and that the girl has really no vocation for a religious life, then’—

‘The Jesuit has got the upper hand once more. I wonder which will conquer,’ thought Hubert, as he stammered and paused.

‘I must endeavour to find that out first,’ continued the priest.

‘And what then?’ asked Hubert, as he paused again.

‘Then, if she has a vocation, she *must* go back, repenting and confessing her sin,’ said the priest in firmer tones.

‘And if she has not?’ asked Hubert, with a mocking tone of voice which did not escape the other’s quick ear.

‘If she has not,’ he replied, his face flushing to the very temples, ‘you and I must assist her to escape, Hubert.’

The words were spoken humbly, even deprecatingly, and he held up Marguerite’s letter as he spoke, as though making it his apology.

‘The man has conquered,’ thought Hubert. ‘Your holiness will allow her to escape if she has no vocation,’ he said in the same mocking tone. ‘And you want my help! Let me tell you, Louis,

you have come to the right man. Vocation or no vocation, that girl shall not be sent back to her cage. The bird has escaped, and shame, oh ! shame upon you that, with that message from the dead in your hand, you can talk so coolly of again imprisoning her ! What ! with the fate of Marie and Marguerite before you, can you, dare you do such a cruel act ? Not to mention the meanness of betraying a woman who has put her trust in you ; why, the very savages would blush to do the like ! Where is she ? has she come to you ?' he cried, his eyes flashing as he laid violent hands on the priest, as though afraid he might escape before he answered the question.

'She is safe in my lodgings,—locked in,—I have the key in my pocket,' Father Louis replied, shaking himself free from the other's grasp. 'It was for safety,—I am no jailor,' he added hastily.

'A Jesuit, and no jailor ?' cried Hubert ; 'well, we'll let that pass. Come, seeing you have come to me for help, I'll go with you, and hear what the poor girl has to say for herself.'

'But she is a nun,' said Father Louis, with a not unnatural hesitation in the circumstances.

'She is a nun no longer,' cried Hubert ; 'and, at any rate, what is a nun but a woman ? None of your sophistries for me, Father Louis ; I was

emancipated from all such nonsense long ago. You remind me,' he added, laughing merrily, 'of an apprentice of mine, who, on his companion crying to him "to attend to the shop, for a man had come in," cried, "It's not a man, it's a soldier!" But I'll excuse you, seeing you must stick to the laws of the Church. As for this girl, I'll take care you don't hurt a hair of her head; she's a solemn legacy bequeathed to us by Marguerite.'

'Bequeathed to me,' interrupted the priest.

'Ay, bequeathed to you,' said his friend drily; 'I'll not dispute the honour, but I'll see that you fulfil the conditions.'

'I shall make no promises,' said the priest; 'the girl may by this time have repented, and be anxious to return to the convent.'

'A sudden conversion, truly, effected by the air of the priest's chamber,' said the other with a sneer; 'but the suggestion is merely to uphold your consistency. You would have been a lawyer, Louis, had you not been a Jesuit; you showed the faculty when a mere boy. I remember when you and I were playing one day with some companions, a stone one of us threw struck by accident the glass roof of a conservatory, and the gardener belonging to the place rushing out in a

rage, we all took refuge in flight,—all but you, Louis, who stood your ground, and coolly requested to be shown what damage had been done. Ah, those were happy days,' he added with a heartfelt sigh, his whole face again softening in expression. 'Come, let us go,' he said the next moment, seizing his hat and pushing his visitor before him without ceremony out of the shop.





CHAPTER V.

THE PRIEST AND THE PROTESTANT.

'Thus men go wrong with an ingenious skill,
Bend the straight rule to their own crooked will ;
And with a clear and shining lamp supplied,
First put it out, then take it for a guide.'

CORA awoke, to start up with a frightened scream, for two men stood opposite her couch, gazing earnestly at her. Failing at the moment to recognise Father Louis, she saw in him only a priest and a pursuer, and seeing the other man in the dress of a civilian, she threw herself at his feet, and clasping his knees, besought his protection in pitiful, imploring accents. All the tenderness of Hubert Ange's sensitive nature was roused by the appeal, all the chivalry of the true gentleman rose and armed itself within him ; and gently lifting the poor girl, he placed her on a seat, assuring her in kind, encouraging accents that he would defend her liberty to the

last drop of his blood, whilst, at the same time, he cast a triumphant glance on the discomfited priest.

When Cora recognised the priest, she apologized in trembling tones; but the sweet gravity of his reassuring smile convinced her once more, that, priest though he was, he was more worthy of love than fear. But he had a stern duty to discharge, with which no feelings of selfish consideration could interfere; and with consummate skill he began to question and probe her, whilst with knitted brows and folded arms Ange listened in silence as the priest laid bare the poor girl's heart, and was reluctantly convinced that Marguerite was right, and that the fugitive nun had indeed no vocation for a religious life. True, this did not absolve him from the painful duty incumbent upon him as a Catholic priest; but conscientious as he was, and ready to sacrifice personal feeling in the service of the Church, his whole soul rose in rebellion at the idea of compelling the girl, who had trusted to his honour, to return to her prison. But his puzzled cogitations were put a stop to by Hubert, who had observed a profound silence, but who now asserted his right to be heard.

'You have said your say, and tortured your

victim long enough,' he cried in scornful tones. 'I hope you have enjoyed your self-imposed task, and feel satisfied with the result, and with the proofs you have got of the effects of your system. You have used well the sharp steel of the confessional knife in laying bare the secret recesses of a human heart. My poor child,' he said, turning to Cora, his tone changing to one of infinite tenderness, such as a mother might have used to a tried and suffering child, 'let this be the last time you submit to such an ordeal. Man has no right thus impiously to take the place of Him to whom alone you are answerable for your motives. I hope you are satisfied with the result,' he said, again addressing the priest, and resuming his ironical tone; 'you have clearly proved that, so far from having any vocation for a religious life, she has lost whatever of religious principle or feeling she may have once possessed. It matters little whether she call herself Catholic or Protestant; she is virtually an infidel, and you have your own system to blame for it.'

'Nay!' interrupted the priest; and a controversy followed between the two men, listened to by Cora with breathless interest and varying feelings.

Both were living in the belief of unseen

realities, and in the hope of future happiness both acknowledged the same Head, and put their trust in Him as their Saviour; both looked, like the smitten Israelites, to the same Cross; but in the case of the Catholic, it was a cross tarnished by tawdry ornamentation, obscured by clouds of tradition, well-nigh smothered under rites and ceremonies; whilst, to the clearer gaze of the Protestant, it stood forth in all its unadorned purity, '*Majestic in its own simplicity.*' Whilst the priest spoke, all the lasting influences of childhood, all the prejudices instilled by education, were roused within Cora, and she trembled under the subtle arguments and solemn words of one who, blinded as he was, was no sophist, but spake as he believed; but when Hubert, taking the Word of God as his weapon and standpoint, quoted facts and doctrines, maxims and injunctions, which at a stroke seemed to sweep away the fine metaphysical web woven by the Jesuit, the tide turned, a breath as of liberty seemed to refresh her puzzled thoughts,—liberty to think for herself, a liberty which defied the right of any mere man to claim to interfere with. It was only on looking back that Cora could thus analyze her feelings. At the time, the light which dawned upon her was dim and partial,

and was all but extinguished as she listened to the masterly replies of the Jesuit. But another light gradually broke in upon her, which speedily absorbed every other feeling, and raised her interest in the Protestant to a high degree ; for the two men called each other by their Christian names, and she discovered that the man who was espousing her cause so warmly was no other than the Hubert of Marguerite's story. Yes, it must be Marguerite's brother who was thus familiarly designated by her old lover,—the noble, courageous boy who had dared to set the priests at defiance by acting out his conscientious convictions ; whose faith and sincerity had been so sorely tried, but had so nobly stood the test. Yes, this must be the hero of her convent dreams ; and gazing on his countenance with growing interest and enlightened eyes, she wondered she had not sooner discovered his likeness to Marguerite, a likeness she now thought so striking.

Looking at her by accident, Hubert found her eyes fixed upon his face, with an expression in them which he could not fathom ; and blushing to find himself an object of so much interest, he stammered and paused in the middle of a sentence,—a pause which attracted the priest's attention also to Cora, who, discovering them

both staring at her, blushed painfully and turned away her eyes.

‘We have forgotten you, my daughter, in the heat of our controversy,’ said the priest, pitying her embarrassment; ‘but I see you have been listening attentively, and I cannot but hope that what I have said may have made some impression, and that you may yet change your mind. Be not afraid to confess that you have done wrong. It is surely better to repent than to persevere in wrong-doing.’

For a moment, strange to say, Cora hesitated. It was a priest who spoke, and early prejudices are strong; and as his words, mild but authoritative, fell upon her ear, she felt as though she could resist no longer. But a glance from Hubert, who was burning to interfere, and yet anxious that she should decide for herself, recalled her to her senses, and she cried, ‘Go back? Never! never!’

‘Do you intend, then, to become a Protestant?’ asked the priest; but Cora’s only reply was a bewildered glance. With her it was simply a question of liberty; religion had nothing to do with it.

‘Don’t decide that at present,’ said Hubert. ‘To be a Christian is of infinitely more im-

portance than to call yourself either Catholic or Protestant. Back to the convent against your will you shall not go so long as this arm retains its power,' and he lifted his right arm with a threatening gesture, which caused the priest to retreat a few steps farther back. But neither did Cora understand her enthusiastic champion. She was completely worn out both in body and in mind, and raising both hands to her head, she gave utterance to a piercing scream, and fell at their feet in a death-like swoon.

'Poor child, we have tried you too much,' murmured Father Louis, as they lifted her from the ground.

Cora was delirious for some weeks, and on recovering consciousness, found herself still in the priest's chamber, carefully watched and tended by a Sister of Mercy, who put no questions and made no allusions to her former life. During her convalescence, Father Louis visited her daily, and she learned to love Marguerite's old lover as a father. He never spoke of her returning to the convent, but talked of her escape as a settled matter, cheering and encouraging her by every means in his power. Hubert Ange, too, came often to see her, and to him she could talk freely of the sister they had both loved, and

whom Cora had nursed so tenderly; and the memory of Marguerite became a tender bond between them, which daily strengthened their growing friendship. But as her strength returned, it became a serious question with both Catholic and Protestant what was to be done with the escaped nun. That she must leave the land of her birth seemed absolutely necessary. That she should do so secretly, without the knowledge of her relations, seemed equally necessary, for, being bigoted Catholics, they both felt that to communicate with them ere she was beyond the power of the priests might not only be dangerous, but fatal to her liberty.

‘She must go to England,’ said Hubert, as one day they sat in his back shop communing together.

‘Poor child! what could she do there, alone and unprotected?’ sighed Father Louis, who had fully assumed the office of Cora’s guardian and protector. ‘What would you think of marrying her, and going with her?’ he added, with a furtive glance at Hubert, who reddened to the temples as he ejaculated:

‘Marry her! marry a nun!’

‘I thought, when I hesitated as to the propriety of your visiting her, you said she was a nun no

longer; and that at any rate a nun was only a woman, as a soldier was a man,' said the priest. 'You even taunted me with sophistry, and declared that you yourself had long ago been emancipated from all such nonsense.'

'True, very true,' said Hubert, somewhat abashed; 'but early prejudices do stick to a man, it would appear.'

'Luther married a nun,' continued the other, who was now only suggesting an idea which had gradually been gaining strength in his own mind, since he had on one occasion found Hubert amusing Cora by playing on the violin (which he had discovered in the cupboard whilst unceremoniously inspecting the priest's chamber), whilst she lay in the *fauteuil*, listening to the music with an expression of dreamy happiness in her eyes which showed she had for the time being forgotten all her troubles; and now, the ice broken, he returned to the charge at every convenient opportunity.

'You have often spoken of emigrating,' he said one day. 'You labour under great disadvantages here; in England you would have liberty to worship God according to your conscience, and you have talents and resources which would gain you independence anywhere.'

'You forget,' said Hubert gloomily, as he raised

the upper crape band, and uncovered the initials 'M. B.'

'No, I do not forget,' sighed the priest; 'and I do not think that your regrets and remembrance of the dead should prevent you accepting the happiness which may be in store for you.' 'Hubert,' he added, speaking with a painful effort, 'I am afraid that in breaking off the connections we once intended to form, it was the women who suffered most. We men have been in the world (for, though a priest, I have been no monk), and its noise and its turmoil, its ever-shifting scenes and the play of its actors, have saved us from the morbid dwelling on one idea which has been the fate of those two, secluded from all intercourse with the world, all participation in its varied interests. Marguerite's letter opened my eyes to this, for, alas! whilst she was to me only a picture of memory, I saw that in her heart I was enshrined, as fresh, as vivid as when, with the spirit of a martyr, she resigned me to the Church.'

Hubert listened in silence, and Father Louis took his silence for acquiescence, and, encouraged by it, he ventured still further:

'The custom of early betrothal, so common in this country,' he continued, 'is an unhealthy and unnatural system, and amongst those brought up

as we were in familiar family intercourse, it tends, I have often thought, to make the bond more like that of brother and sister; and I could fancy you having more real love for this amiable, beautiful girl than even for our poor Marie.' As the priest spoke he watched the effect of his words upon Hubert, knowing well from the nature of the man, that if they wounded him, an indignant denial would be the result; but that if he acknowledged their truth, he was too honest to pretend to what he did not feel.

Hubert sat for some time, with his hand shading his eyes, and when he spoke his words pleased Father Louis even more than his silence.

'You take *my* feelings only into account,' he said in a low tone; 'you speak as though hers were of no account in the matter,—priest-like, you seem to think she has only to obey.'

'Nay, nay, friend,' cried the priest, with an amused smile which Ange did not see; 'I think more of her than of you, and have not the slightest idea of influencing, far less of forcing, her inclinations. I have my own opinion as to her feelings,' he added with pretended carelessness, but keenly watching the effect of his words on Hubert, whose face lighted up as he listened, though he kept his eyes fixed on the ground.

'I am too old,' he muttered. 'Think of the difference in our ages.'

'Well, well,' said Father Louis, 'I will urge it no more,'—thinking at the same time, 'It is all right now, when he has begun to reckon the difference of years.'

He was very anxious to get Cora out of the country. Independent of the really sincere and warm interest he took in her escape, he could not shut his eyes to the inconsistent part he was acting, and the damage his reputation would suffer if his connivance were discovered; and having watched her closely with the keen insight which training and habit had given him in the knowledge of the human heart, he felt sure that Marguerite's brother was not indifferent to her, and that it needed but proofs of affection on his part to draw out hers.

And now he had probed Hubert, and resolved with Jesuitical sagacity to try the effect of a little contradiction in fanning the flame which he was certain was ready to burst forth in his excitable friend, and derived much amusement from the angry astonishment displayed by Hubert as he talked of the fact of his being too old to marry Cora; consulting him, at the same time, as to the best and safest way of getting

her transported to England, and how to find a safe asylum for her there.

Only half deceived, Hubert fumed and fretted ; and, as an initiatory step, he made a compromise with his feelings, and took both crape bands from his arm,—a proceeding which delighted Father Louis, but of which he wisely took no notice. A fortnight afterwards, he came to him radiant with joy. Cora had promised to become his wife, not because she wished an escort to England, but because she really loved him.

‘She looks on me as an old friend,’ he said, with tears in his eyes ; ‘for my dear Marguerite had talked so much about her brother to her, that she feels as though she had known me all my life.’

‘I suspected as much,’ said the priest with a smile ; ‘and, my dear friend,’ he added, laying his hand solemnly on the other’s shoulder, ‘as Marguerite bequeathed her to me, so do I trust her to you not only for life, but for eternity. The Church has signally failed in this instance. I leave it to you to endeavour to supply to your wife that wherein she is lacking. I care not though she become a Protestant like you, if, like you, she become a Christian.’

Hubert warmly grasped the hand which lay

on his shoulder, saying, with much emotion, 'I have often called you a bigot, Louis; but I do so no longer, for, in my opinion, bigotry does not consist in the opinions we hold ourselves, but in the liberty to hold theirs which we give to others.'

'Amen!' said the truly Christian Jesuit.

In due time Hubert and Cora settled in England, and their union proved a happy one. There Cora communicated with her friends through Father Louis, and had the happiness of receiving letters from her mother and sister full of affection and joy, for they had mourned for their lost one as for the dead; and in the reaction of their feelings, they were inclined to look on her marriage with a heretic in a very different light from that which in other circumstances they might have done. That she had been a nun, and had broken her vows, were facts they wisely ignored altogether, even as they ignored the change of faith which in after years she communicated to them; for Father Louis' wishes were fulfilled by Cora becoming a conscientious Christian Protestant. But they came to England to visit her in her foreign home; and Cora found, to her great joy, that though they were Catholic and she was Protestant, their faith was the same, and she thought but little of the difference of their creeds.

Not so her husband ; half measures never satisfied Hubert, and he rested not till by argument, persuasion, and insinuating entreaties he had persuaded them to set the authority of the Church for the time being at defiance, and search the Scriptures for themselves ; and this point gained, he added no more of his own, but waited patiently in full faith for the result. Nor was he disappointed. Knowledge brought light, and light conviction ; and thoroughly convinced of the errors of the system in which they had been born and educated, Cora's mother and sister renounced Popery for ever, and resolved to remain permanently in England, for, though willing if necessary to suffer persecution for the cause of truth, they deemed it unnecessary to *court* suffering by returning to the land of their birth, and Cora felt as though she had nothing more left to wish for.

She kept up a regular correspondence with Father Louis as long as he lived, which, he told her, was the greatest pleasure he allowed himself to indulge in.

'Poor Louis ! we can afford to pity him, Cora,' said Hubert one day, after perusing and reperusing one of his letters.

'Does he need our pity,' was the reply, 'so good, so holy, so Christ-like ?'

‘Yes,’ said Hubert decidedly; ‘any man who has been set free, but who still clings to the remnants of his bondage, still hugs his broken chains, is to be pitied; and I say again, “Poor Louis!” for he believes that the sufferings of an imaginary purgatory are necessary to fit and purify his soul for the enjoyment of heaven. What a happy surprise for him when he finds himself there, the moment after death, “absent from the body, present with the Lord!” Dear Louis! I have loved him all my life, and I love him more than ever now,’ continued Hubert, putting his arms lovingly round his wife as he spoke, ‘for he gave me—SISTER CORA.’



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